

III

Secundus

THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Lord of the Rust Mountains

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The Lord of The Rust Mountains





THE FARAWAY PALADIN III (SECUNDUS) THE LORD OF THE RUST MOUNTAINS

I am Valacirca! The strongest and oldest dragon, feared even by the gods!



Meneldor

Vindalir

William



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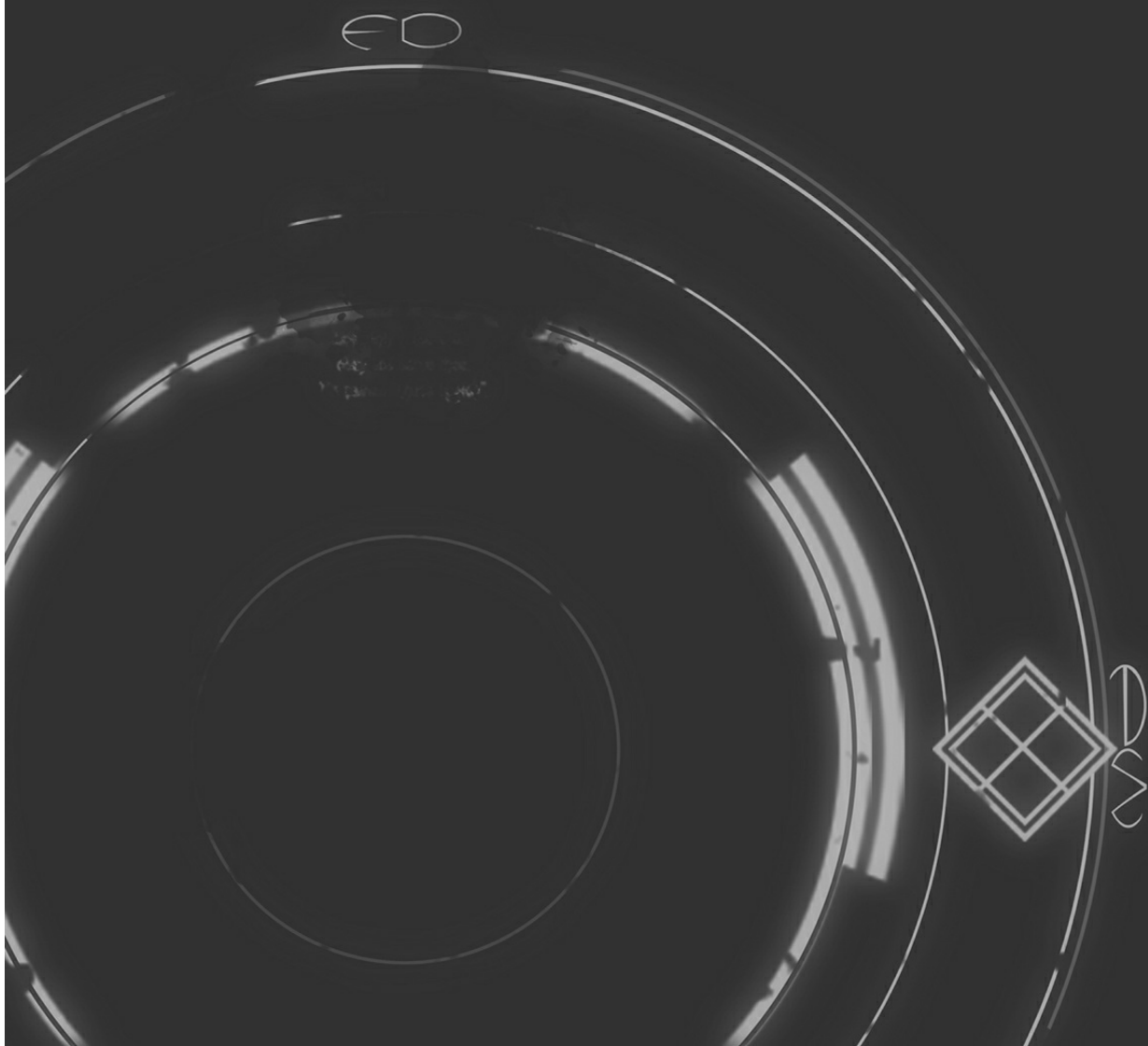
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Prologue



The room featured stonework walls, a small wooden chair and writing desk, and even a comfy-looking bed set into an alcove in the wall. On the shelves and writing desk were everyday items, books, and countless memos that I'd left behind when I set off on my journey. It was my room in that beloved temple on the hill.

I had returned to that city of the dead.

A peaceful homecoming—if only that were the case. The number of demon-related incidents was climbing every day as the dragon howled in the Rust Mountains to the west. The god of undeath's Herald had prophesied that I would die if I took on the dragon, but after a lot of deliberation, I decided to challenge it anyway for the sake of my oath, which I didn't want to break. Of course, I had no intention of dying in vain. I had even put together a strategy. We would go up the river to slip by the demons and launch a surprise attack from the western side of the Rust Mountains. That required going through the city of the dead, and it was for that reason that I'd returned home. It was a small detour before the battle for our lives.

Gus had shown everyone to individual rooms around the temple, and for now we were taking a short moment of respite. The room given to me was this one, which I fondly remembered from my years as a boy. I traced a finger across the cold stone walls. It brought back several memories.

The three undead couldn't tell much of a difference between hot and cold days, but for me, being a living human, the cold winter night had been pretty harsh. Gus grudgingly arranged for a heated stone for me to keep me warm. As I waited by the fireplace for the stone to warm up, Blood told one of his epic tales, with exaggerated gestures of his hands and body. Mary listened to Blood's story with a smile on her face as she sewed, occasionally saying one or two words to keep him talking.

It was a dazzling, happy past. And though it was gone and Blood and Mary were no longer here, I was sure that didn't take away from those days in any way. My happy past continued to shine. And probably, even after Gus disappeared, and even after I died, it would still continue shining forever, like beautiful sand settling at the bottom of the flowing river of time.

My face cracked into a smile. Returning to my home may have made me a little sentimental.

Then, there was a knock on the door to my room. The old door creaked as Menel poked his head around it. “Hey. Coming in.” He peered around the room with interest. “This your room?”

“Yeah.”

Menel hummed vaguely as he looked around. “Small.”

“It was a pretty good fit for me when I was a kid, though.”

These were originally mere sleeping rooms for priests who served the temple. They had a simple construction with almost no space to store anything unnecessary.

“Hey, Will, that old Gus guy, he’s pretty awesome.”

“I thought you were going to say he’s cruder than you imagined, or something.”

“Well, uh. He is. He is, but, uh...” Menel went quiet for a moment while he chose his words, and then spoke in a whisper. “When he was showing me to my room, I felt like he could see right into my mind.”

I nodded.

Many of this world’s greatest and most renowned sorcerers didn’t speak much. Telling lies weakened the power of the Words of Creation. Blunt and empty Words that had no edge and no weight wouldn’t result in anything. So the sorcerers who were called sages chose silence and never took part in common conversation. But as for Gus, he talked, and he talked a *lot*. He laughed joyfully as he willingly talked about money and women and other lowbrow topics. Yet the power of his Words never weakened. Just as a single word from a normally silent person carries extra weight, there was a cutting sharpness in every word of truth from that man who tempered his genius with worldly affairs.

“Yeah, he’s great, isn’t he?”

As far as I knew, there had only been a single occasion when Gus had spoken

anything like a lie: when he decided, in that gloomy underground city, that he needed to kill me.

“He’s my grandpa,” I said proudly and laughed. Menel laughed too.



After I’d set down my stuff, loosened my equipment, and allowed myself a little time to breathe, I left Menel in charge of everyone else and headed over to see Gus. I was looking for information from him.

Right now, Gus was a disciple of God—my god—and bound to this city, but at the same time, he was a sage from two hundred years ago. I thought he might know something beneficial, but that was not the case.

“Regarding the foul-dragon Valacirca, also known as the Gods’ Sickie and Calamity’s Sickie, I’ve never laid eyes on him.” Gus shrugged. “If I’d had the opportunity, I would have wanted to meet him for a negotiation at least once. If he hadn’t joined up with the demons’ forces, we would never have lost so many heroes’ lives in the fight against the High King.”

Gus explained that when it came to dragons as old as the gods, the choice of a single one to side with your forces or the enemy’s had an enormous influence on the balance of a war.

“If you’re going to fight him, I’d focus on his old wounds. Valacirca has fought all kinds of battles since ancient times, against Echoes and numerous heroes, and there are multiple rumors of times during those battles when he sustained wounds and had scales torn off. A dragon’s scales are tough. I’ll tell you now, I doubt even Blood could have cut to the skin through dragonscale.”

Joined by two dwarves, a human warrior, and a half-elf hunter, I was going to be heading to mountains ruled by a dragon, aiming to strike him where his scales had been torn off. It kind of felt like a situation I might have found in an old fantasy novel in my past world. It was no laughing matter that this was now my reality.

“What about the Word of Entity Obliteration?” I asked him about one of the plans I’d been thinking of. Gus had used that Word to take down the Echo of the god of undeath. If we used that, maybe we’d stand a chance...

“Well, yes, if it were to hit, then it could probably blast away a dragon, certainly.”

Gus obviously thought it stood almost no chance of hitting.

“Do you know the reason that Elder Dragons can soar swiftly despite their enormous size? The ancient dragons, as denizens of myth, are closer to the Words than we who live in the modern age.”

Therefore, dragons flew.

“Words soar through the air by nature. That’s why.”

Thanks to being closely connected to the Words, dragons could fly in disregard of all physical laws.

“That’s right. The most ancient of dragons are also users of the ultimate Words. What’s more, Valacirca isn’t a negotiator like the god of undeath. He’s a hardcore, seasoned warmonger. Will, you seem to have become a pretty good user of magic, but if you make this into a battle of Words, you will lose.”

“Magic battle: not in my favor. Got it.”

“A physical battle’s not in your favor, either. His size and the physical strength and toughness that come from it are no joke. As Blood would put it, you’re not a match in muscle.”

It wasn’t as if any of that was news, but it still hurt that I couldn’t win with overwhelming body strength. It meant that I couldn’t use the main strategy that had been leading me to victory so far.

“Since times of old, the tactic for killing a dragon has been to make full preparations, then wait for a moment when the dragon is unprepared and launch a surprise attack on its den. But this time... well, you know about the horde of demons around there. Valacirca is most likely using the demon forces as a replacement for a warning siren.”

“I get the feeling I’m starting to understand the reason the god of undeath tried to stop me.”

The dragon had the power of ancient magic, overwhelming size and muscle, and the experience and knowledge to compensate for his own weaknesses. No

wonder Stagnate concluded that I had virtually no chance of winning right now.

“Hmph. Stagnate, huh? Was it a Herald?”

“A raven came.”

Gus snorted, unamused. “It sounds like he’s taken to you.”

“Much to my displeasure.” I frowned as well.

“His thoughts are those of a god. Most of us earthly beings can’t follow them.”

“Yeah.”

“And far too ‘friendly’ for a god! No, ‘devious’ is the word I’d use! Bringing us a contract at a time when we couldn’t escape—I’ve never known such slyness! It brought me great satisfaction to tear *that* contract apart, I assure you! It violated all sense and reason! You’d have thought a god could afford to be less underhanded! It’s no wonder he’s counted among the evil gods!” After getting all that off his chest, Gus sighed. “But I can’t say I’m not the slightest bit grateful,” he said, his expression sullen.



“After becoming undead and being given the opportunity to raise you, Blood and Mary, two of my very few friends, who I even thought of as a son and daughter, were able to pass on in happiness.” Gus glanced away from me. Over there were Blood and Mary’s graves. “And I, too, was given the chance to raise you,” he said, without returning his gaze. “I never took a student. My knowledge and techniques would die with me, and I would blossom brightly and scatter gracefully away. I thought I was content with that, but far from it. You’d be surprised how much regret you feel once you die and all is lost.”

“Gus...”

“Thanks to you, they’ve been carried on. I guess this is all part of the richness of life. Though I’m long dead, of course.” He laughed loudly. Then, after a short pause, he spoke again with a more serious expression. “Listen, are you sure you understand?”

“Don’t worry. I know.”

That was why I'd come alone to talk to Gus. The reality was—

“There's virtually no room for negotiation with a dragon.”

“Precisely.” Gus nodded. “Even the gods have acknowledged that there is no greater force in this region than you. That makes this the perfect moment for Valacirca to strike.”

“I think so, too. *The gods are already wary of Valacirca.*”

The god of undeath had told me that he would want to slay the dragon himself if he could manifest an Echo. And Gus had told me that whether a dragon that old and ancient sided with your forces or the enemy's would have an enormous influence on the balance of a war. Dragons living in the current age were that much of a threat, and conversely, for a dragon to live in this age demanded he work that hard for it.

“Valacirca himself is probably aware that he's in a situation where if he continues sleeping and becomes isolated, eventually some god will see him as an obstruction to their plans and send an Echo or one of their disciples to kill him. Once the injury Lord Aurvangr inflicted on Valacirca's eye heals, he's going to need to either take the initiative to build up a force of his own or join one somewhere else and start a war.”

“Precisely. He's like a fish who must constantly swim to stay alive. Valacirca can only live within the maelstrom of war, and because of that, he'll never regard you, with your peaceful views, as his master. If there's no being as overwhelming as the High King in this modern age, he'll have to raise his own banner or join with other forces to start a great war. In any event, he has no other choice than to throw the world into chaos and make the gods focus elsewhere.” He looked at me. “And you are the only one with any power to make him think twice.”

I nodded. “And I don't have enough. From a dragon's perspective, I guess he might hesitate a little, but I'm an obstacle he can overcome.”

Just as I had overcome every obstacle in my path that I thought was surmountable, the dragon would look at me in the same way, and attempt to overcome me.

“Will... You’re going to die.”

“Maybe, but I’ve decided to fight.” The warmth my god had left with me was still alive within my chest. “Leaving the dragon alone won’t help. A war will start anyway.”

“You could just run.” Gus looked at me intently.

“Gus...” While feeling grateful for his words, I gave him back a smile. “Living and being alive aren’t the same.”

Abandoning everything and just hanging on was only ‘being alive.’ I’d learned through both of my lives that that wasn’t good enough.

Gus sighed. It was a deep sigh of resignation. “So be it.”

I switched my tone to a brighter one and changed the topic. “Oh, right, Gus. I’ve been wanting to ask you this for a while. I heard a story about when you three killed a wyvern. Do you remember the human boy and half-elf girl you lent money and a dagger to?”

“Hmm? Oh, that takes me back. I do indeed.”

“They moved up in the world and became nobility. I heard the half-elf girl is still waiting now, even as an old woman.”

“I see...” Gus smiled. It was a lonely smile. “But, well, just look at me. I’m afraid I can no longer go to collect.”

“In that case, can I go in your place?”

Thankfully, Gus seemed to have understood what I was getting at. “Mm, please do. Collecting money is an important task, and a dead man can’t do it!”

“Right! It’s important to get people to give back what they’ve borrowed!”

Yes, I still had plenty of things I wanted to do. The odds were against me, but I had no intention of dying.

“Then it’s fine by me.”

I could tell that “since you intend on returning alive” was implied.

“If you’re going to be my agent, then I can’t very well have you dying, can I?” He grinned broadly, rolled up a sleeve, and clenched a fist. “The equipment

used by our brothers-in-arms who took on the High King are still here in this city. Would you and your party like some new gear before you go?”

“Of course!” I grinned back and nodded.



Saying he would show us some weapons, Gus led us outside the temple. By the side of the temple, there was a small storehouse. Mary had used it in place of a shed to store things like tools for taking care of the vegetable garden.

I frowned and cocked my head to the side. I’d been inside the storehouse before, of course, and there weren’t any weapons in there then. Come to think of it, though, where *had* Blood been storing his weapons? I never—

“Watch.”

As I got that far in my thinking, Gus muttered a couple of Words, and at one edge of the dimly lit storehouse, in a place that I’d thought was floor, a hidden door appeared. Everyone’s eyes opened wide. It was Misdirection magic.

“I didn’t know we had a place like this...”

“We couldn’t show you where they were as a child. Especially not after the recklessness of the Mary incident.” He gave me a look. “You can’t see through the Word of Misdirection without a suspicious mind. When you came to the storehouse, you always had a purpose. You would have been so preoccupied thinking about whatever you came for that you would never have bothered suspecting there might be a Word set upon the floor.”

Then he laughed and added that the trick to using Misdirection magic was to place it somewhere where the target would never even consider they were being misled.

Simple power aside, I still didn’t feel like I was even close to matching up with Gus in terms of crafty use of Words like this. I didn’t have the experience or the personality.

“You’re too honest, that’s your problem,” Gus said, grinning as if he’d read my mind.

I laughed and gave a resigned shrug.

“Now then. It seems that wine was once made here at this temple. Blood and Mary turned the part above ground into a shed, but this was originally a wine cave. Accordingly,” he said, opening the door with psychokinesis, “it goes underground.”

We followed Gus’s magical light down a set of stairs paved with flat stones and entered into a wide-open space. To our left and right, there were racks where wine barrels must have once been stacked, and—

“Whoa...”

“Ooh, wow!”

Menel and Al exclaimed in turn, and Reystov and Ghelreis stared in amazement. The place was full with weapons and armor. I could tell that each and every one of them was a work of equally fine craftsmanship.

“Take whatever you want,” Gus said, smiling. “I’m sure their owners would allow it.”

Everyone gave him a little bow and went around investigating the weapons. Even Reystov and Ghelreis’s eyes were shining. It really was true that no matter what age a man reached, he would always love things like weapons, steel, and leather.

And now that I knew they’d been maintaining a place like this, I had to wonder—

“Gus, was this Blood’s...”

“Mm. He was the one taking care of the armory. These are the weapons of the warriors who once joined us in taking on the High King. There are also some good-quality weapons here that were just left in this city by unknown owners. In any case, Blood said he couldn’t bear to leave them to rust up and get covered in dust, so he brought them in here and gave them regular maintenance.”

Now it made sense. All the various types of weapons Blood had brought out from somewhere for my training when I was young probably came from here. As I looked around at all the weapons in this new light, many of them did look kind of familiar. Hmm, except—

“When I fought Stagnate at the bottom of the temple hill, the skeletons that rose up had rusted weapons and stuff.”

“Yes. Most of those were nothing special, just ordinary weapons picked from the city to bury alongside them. It was Blood’s idea. He said a warrior always needs some kind of weapon, even on the way back to the eternal cycle. Did you notice that hardly any of them were wearing armor? That’s why.”

Gus added that the mithril mail I was wearing, which I’d gotten from one of the skeletons, was something that particular person had requested be buried with him.

“Oh! Then... I should—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, keep it. It’s not worth worrying about at this point. Just think of it as a compensation fee for the trouble his corpse caused.”

“You just do things any old way, don’t you?!”

But I couldn’t relinquish it at this point. I faced the graveyard at the bottom of the hill and prayed. *I have to take this mail. I’m sorry...*

Gus laughed loudly. “Well, I’m sure he’ll forgive you. It’s for Blood’s son, after all.”

“What kind of person was he?”

“His name was Telperion. Silver-string Telperion.” If I remembered correctly, that elegant-sounding name was Elvish. “He was born in the Forest of Erin.”

“When the glittering silver bowstring sings, there is no enemy who does not fall.” A voice drifted like a cool breeze. It was Menel. I looked over, and saw that he was gazing upon a glittering silver bow and smiling. “I’m from the same place.”



“Ohh, so you’re from the Great Forest of Erin.”

“Pretty much,” Menel replied curtly.

Gus had the eyes of someone looking at something long lost. “Your silver hair—do you have a blood connection to Telperion?”

“Distantly related, but both part of... Ithil... Silvermoon Branch... uh...”

“Is it what in human society we would call a lineage?”

“That’s the one. Huh. Surprised you knew that.”

In elven society, a clan with shared mythology was called a Trunk, and a lineage that could be traced back to the family relations was called a Branch. Each of those was prefixed by a name in some way associated with the beauty of nature. I’d learned this from Gus.

“Telperion once stumbled over the translation for the same word.”

“Huh.”

“So what kind of person was this Telperion?” I said while peering at the pieces of gear Menel was looking at: leather gloves, a bow with a silver string, and several strangely shaped mithril arrowheads.

While I was looking at these, Gus thought for a moment, then said, “He was incredibly conservative and proud. A very elvish elf. He used to fight a lot with Blood back when they’d only just met.”

“Ahh...”

Despite how he looked, Blood was a man with quite a lot of common sense. However, he could definitely be quick to anger, and if he ran into the typical elf that you heard about in the stories, an argument was all but certain.

“Telperion was descended directly from the head of the Ithil Branch,” Menel said. “Noble blood. Wouldn’t surprise me if he had a high opinion of himself to match. Probably annoyed the crap out of anyone who had to deal with him.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Why did someone noble like that go outside the forest?” I asked.

Menel hummed.

“Why don’t you tell him the story?” said Gus, smiling wryly. “When a warrior inherits a famous weapon, it’s an ancient custom to talk about its history.”

Telling the history of the weapon—Blood had said the same thing when he’d passed Overeater down to me. Menel’s expression turned a little bit

complicated, and then he started to speak in a clear voice.

“Silver-string Telperion. He was a master of the bow; he had fellowship with the fae; he flew like the wind across the plains. His flute whistled elegant and bright. He could recite countless traditions and legends from memory, and even among the wise elves, few could match his wisdom. So they say.”

Menel recited well. He was clearly familiar with this, even if not to the same level as Bee. The sound of his voice had started to draw the others around as well. He was good enough to make money off this—in fact, he seemed to have been doing all kinds of work before, so maybe there *was* a time when he earned money through telling stories.

“Telperion had a friend. A kid who was born the same year as him—rare for elves, who don’t have many children. They grew up together as foster brothers. The foster brother wasn’t as talented as Telperion, but he had passion and a dream.”

It was a dream of one day going to the outside world.

“The foster brother talked about his dream, but Telperion couldn’t understand. All things pure and beautiful are in the forest—why would he want to go to the corrupted outside world? Telperion and his foster brother got on well, but when it came to this, they always argued, apparently.”

Speaking eloquently, Menel continued. “But the foster brother died. They were hunting beasts that had trespassed into the forest. They took down one, but then Telperion was attacked by a second that they didn’t realize was there. And the foster brother shielded him, even though the day he’d leave the forest, the day he’d dreamed of for so long, was just around the corner.”

It was a sudden death, with no last words.

Menel dropped his tone slightly. “Telperion held his corpse and let out three long, sorrowful screams. The screams echoed around the forest, lingering long after they had ended, and the fae are said to have shed tears at the sound.”

There was a mystery-filled atmosphere about this story of the past, told in a storehouse lit by magical light as weapons with history surrounded us.

“And after Telperion spent seven months in mourning for his friend, he

decided to set out on a journey. Shrugging off opposition from his elders, he donned his friend's chain mail and took his silver-stringed bow in hand."

Without having any idea what good there was in the outside world—

"He went in search of the indefinable 'thing' his friend had dreamed of."



After getting that far, Menel looked back at Gus. "That's as much as I know. That, and he died hunting the High King. The elders in the Forest of Erin mourn Telperion's death even now. I heard it enough to make my ears bleed."

"Hmm..."

"This is perfect, actually. I was thinking about asking you this anyway, Gus the Sage."

"Gus is fine."

"Old Gus, then." Menel fixed his jade eyes on Gus and asked, "Did Telperion find the 'thing' he was looking for?"

Gus smiled when he heard that question, with eyes that seemed to look off into the distance, as though recalling a very nostalgic memory. "Mm, he did indeed. Telperion certainly did discover something wonderful!"

"I see." There wasn't much of a change in Menel's expression, but his mouth turned up at the corners slightly. "That's good. Glad to hear it."

Menel didn't ask anything more—not about Telperion's answer, nor about the person himself. Instead, he lowered his eyes and fell silent, perhaps in prayer, then put on the gloves and took hold of the mithril string shining silver.

Gus laughed. "All that aside—Meneldor or whatever, can you handle that? Mithril strings are a good match for fae, but it's said that an average archer will lose fingers."

"No problem." He changed the string over to his own bow and drew it back a few times. The bow bent back like a full moon, and the string sang a beautiful note as it was stretched to its limit. Gus listened nostalgically to the bow's prelude to battle.

“See?”

“So... aren’t you going to let it go?” I said.

“N-No, you idiot! Dry-firing damages the bow, don’t you know that?”

“What?! Really?!”

I didn’t use bows, so I had no idea. Ah, but now that I thought about it, that would mean that all the energy that would be used to fire the arrow would instead go into the bow. Yeah, that didn’t sound very good.

“I can’t believe the stuff you don’t know sometimes when you seriously know pretty much everything else.”

“It’s how I was educated.”

“Don’t try to push the blame onto me, boy.”

Al and the others listening to us laughed.

“Uh, guys,” Menel said, “we don’t have the luxury of using time like elves. Quit looking at us and go find a weapon you think you can use. Go on!”

“I’m decided,” Reystov said, unfazed. “Don’t want one.”



“You don’t *want* one?” Menel said in disbelief. “They’re all pretty good weapons, brother.”

“Yeah, it’s a hell of a sight. But I don’t care how well a weapon performs, if I ain’t used to it, I can’t trust it,” Reystov replied pointedly. Gus and Ghelreis nodded in understanding.

“I guess.” Menel still sounded doubtful.

“Umm...” Al was tilting his head, so I decided to say something.

“Right... This depends a lot on your style. Menel’s style is tactical, I guess—he makes use of whatever’s around, so he can be more flexible with his weapons. He can always borrow the power of the fairies, after all. So long as he can disrupt the enemy with his feet, staying at medium-to-long range and attacking from there, he’s happy with anything.”

Even if Menel had to go defenseless through a wasteland with monsters roaming around everywhere, he'd probably do just fine by picking up rocks or something and calling to the fairies for help.

"In contrast, Reystov's specialty is close-range fighting. When your thing is battles at a risky distance where a single moment can make the difference between kill or be killed, you can't help being insistent about some things. It's not like he can't fight with a makeshift weapon, but he's specialized for his current one."

Reystov optimized his weapon for his body and his movements and made sure that he could unsheathe it in a split second if anything happened. He became one with his weapon. His modified sheath, the sturdy handle, his neatly trimmed nails—all of it was for that purpose.

"So he can't swap his weapon for an unfamiliar one at the eleventh hour," I concluded.

Reystov nodded and agreed. I could use pretty much anything as well, but when it came down to it, my mindset was closer to Reystov's, so I understood well how he felt.

"Boring or not, I want to fight with a weapon I'm comfortable with," he said.

Al blew out a puff of air, seemingly impressed at how Reystov could say that so firmly with all these incredible weapons in front of him. "That's amazing."

"That said, ah... Reystov. You know what you're up against. Are you sure?" Gus sounded apprehensive.

"Doesn't bother me. But—"

"But?"

"Gus the Sage, I want to borrow your skill with the Signs."

"Oh?"

"If you could carve some Words into my weapons and armor just so much that it still feels basically like what I'm used to, that'd be great. I could get used to a small change like that in a few days."

"I see. Alright, let me have them a moment." Using psychokinesis, Gus took

Reystov's sword and leather armor. He took them apart effortlessly and examined them closely from all kinds of angles, beginning with the sword. "Hmm. It's ordinary, but... northern-style equipment, I see."

"Yeah."

At the foot of the Ice Mountains in the far reaches of the northern continent of Grassland, there was a group of warlike folk who continually forged steel in a canyon where freezing wind blew. They constantly fought against the evil gods' minions coming down south, and they specialized in blades with the cold, crystal clarity of ice and robust, practical construction.

"Blood preferred the wider swords of the south. I haven't seen a northern one in a while. Hmm, it's a good sword. Well-used and cared for, even though it has been worn down somewhat."

Swords couldn't be used endlessly. If you gave them a proper sharpening, you would lose an amount of steel about the size of a small ring. Repeated enough times, the weapon would become thin and eventually either bend or break. However, at times, names given to swords survived longer than others, in just the same way as the names of old heroes—like Blood, Mary, and Telperion.

"One day, they will speak of this as 'Reystov's sword' and not as an ordinary one."

"Yeah." Reystov nodded. "Hope so."



After that, Al and Ghelreis upgraded their weapons and armor as well.

"Hmm. I will take these." Ghelreis chose metal armor, a large shield, and a one-handed mace. The armor was large and rounded, and I got the impression that it was specialized for glancing off attacks. The shield was also large and sturdy, and I could tell that it must have belonged to a famous dwarven warrior. And the mace, which was diamond-shaped, had a number of protrusions called flanges and looked like it would pack an incredible amount of blunt force.

"Ohh, Sword-smasher Bavor's set. You have discerning taste."

"There are many users of blades."

Some demons had outer shells that were hard and smooth. Blades weren't very effective against enemies like that because the blade would slide and leave you open. If we needed to, both Reystov and I could perform stunts like using our swords to deal a blunt-force hit or strike at the joints in their shells. Even so, I was grateful to have at least one person with a blunt weapon.

"Bavor was a wandering dwarven warrior, not part of any clan, but he had a playful personality. He was a master at bending and smashing blades of any kind, but he was friendly, you see. I don't get on well with dwarves, but he could hold a friendly conversation even with me. He had that kind of wonderful warmth to him."

"Oh?"

"He took part in the defeat of the High King. He called it revenge for the Iron Mountains."

As Ghelreis listened to this anecdote of a hero of his race, a subtle smile crossed his scarred face.

I heard Menel's doubting voice again. "Oh, come on, don't you think that's just a bit too heavy?"

"No, I can handle it, I think."

I turned around to see Al holding a hefty halberd, tentatively and gingerly swinging it and pulling it in as Menel watched him. It had a pretty bulky construction and was made fully of metal right down to the handle.

"Yes, it's okay. I can swing it, no problem."

"Ohh! That's some impressive strength you have to be able to swing that around." Gus was blinking his eyes in astonishment. "Its former owner was Ewen the Immense."

I remembered hearing that name in Blood's stories when I was a child.

"Skill aside, he was Blood's twin in monstrous power. He had a round body and was always smiling. He was a good guy. He wasn't very fond of fighting, though. If things had been more peaceful, he might have been able to continue as a skilled farmer, who knows."

He'd had Blood's back during the battle against the High King, plowing down the demons without end until he himself was ended.

It wasn't just Ewen the Immense, it was Sword-smasher Bavor and Silver-string Telperion, too—in fact, *all* these heroes that Gus was now speaking of and that Blood had spoken of fondly in the past had lost their lives for the sake of the effort to defeat the High King. Each one of the hundreds of weapons and pieces of armor filling this armory had a story, and each of those stories was now concluded, the final period struck by war and death. Now only these arms still slept here in silence, with many stories that once mattered greatly to someone locked away inside them.

I found myself in prayer, as if something had prodded me to do it. I felt like it would have been wrong not to.

God, god of the flame, please, wherever they may go—

I whispered. “Let there be guidance and repose.”

When I returned from my transcendent state of prayer, Gus was smiling at me. It was a different smile from normal, a smile that seemed to say he was thinking fondly of his old home.

“Hey, Gus?”

“What?”

“After I do something about the mountain demons and the dragon and come home again, can I bring this poet girl back here with me? She's a halfling and she does get a bit excited... if that's still okay.”

“Sure, do what you want. I'd be happy to tell her any story she wants told.” Gus really was wise. He was very quick to understand what I wanted.

“Thanks.” So many stories here had gone untold. I was sure that Bee would be very glad to retell them.

“Say...”

“Hm?”

“By the way, Will...”

“Yeah?”

“Could that girl be...” Gus’s eyes shone expectantly.

“She’s a good friend, but we don’t have the relationship you’re hoping for.”

Gus’s shoulders drooped. For some reason, he looked terribly disappointed.



After that, we found some well-built dwarven armor for Al as well. This city was originally a place where both humans and dwarves lived, so there was plenty of armor for the dwarven physique.

How was it that dwarves, a foreign race, had lived here? That had struck me as strange once or twice when I was training in the underground city, but now I understood. This lakeside city was a transfer point for trade with the Iron Country, which was why people and dwarves lived together here. Its ruins told of a prosperous city, big and wealthy to the point that Torch Port as it stood right now didn’t even compare. It must have been a place full of smiling faces.

I wondered—I wondered if one day I would be able to bring such a sight back to this area and this city. Would I be able to smash apart the demons’ schemes, avoid being roasted by the dragon’s flames, safeguard the peaceful activity of the city and help it to grow? I wanted to.

As I thought about this, I picked out a few items from the many weapons and pieces of armor here.

“A big shield?”

“Yes.” I nodded back to Reystov. “As a measure against dragon breath.”

It was an impressively large and obviously heavy-duty shield, big enough for a person to hide their entire body behind, and it had the Word of Protection engraved upon it countless times. The circular shield I’d been using so far was useful, and I intended to keep on using it, but that shield’s primary emphasis was portability.

“Considering our opponent, the bigger the shield, the better.”

There were disadvantages as well: the larger shield would make it more difficult for me to attack with my own weapon, and its increased weight would

be more of a pain to handle. However, I now had enough strength and skill that I didn't have to give even the slightest thought to those differences.

“And some additional armor...”

I added on several pieces of metal armor. When I left this temple years ago, I had no idea how far I was going to have to travel, so I couldn't possibly have worn these. But now that I knew the rough distance to the field of battle, that wasn't a problem anymore.

“And this.”

It was a pretty thick—in other words, heavy—dagger with straight edges and a well-sharpened point.

“Hm? What's up with that dagger?” Menel said. “Isn't the handle the wrong way?”

“Ah, you're right,” Al said, peering at it. “That's unusual.”

“It's meant to be worn on your right.”

Most bladed weapons are worn on the left of the body. That's to enable the familiar movement of holding the sheath in place with the left hand while the right hand grips the handle and pulls it out. However, this stiletto had been made to be worn on the right, to make it convenient to pull out in a grappling situation. It was made so that if you got into a close quarters fight where it might be quite difficult to draw your weapon, you could conclude everything with two actions: first, grabbing the handle with your dominant right hand and pulling it out with a backwards grip, and second, swinging it down forcefully.

“You take this, Al, and get yourself used to it. I'm sure that halberd will come in useful, but you aren't going to be very nimble with it.”

“Oh! Okay! Umm... Who owned this dagger?”

“My dad.”

Al's eyes went wide in shock. “I couldn't—”

“It's okay. Take it.”

Blood had once told me with a proud grin that this right-wield was a great

trick. He said that he had claimed victory over countless monsters and formidable opponents in situations where he couldn't use his more familiar two-handed sword. He had even brought it to that final battle, so there was no doubt it was one of his favorites.

"I just felt like it would be better for you to hold onto it for some reason." It was just a gut feeling. But Blood was one to trust his gut. So I decided to do the same.

"So it's a momento."

"Yes. But I'm giving it to you. You should have it."

It looked like he didn't know what to say.

"It's okay." I handed over the dagger. "I've already received a lot of precious things from them."

Right, Blood and Mary?

I whispered those words inside my heart.



And so we finished our preparations and decided to stay the night in the city of the dead. Also, there was of course no food or anything of the sort here. I could receive bread from God, just as Mary had been doing, but that was essentially the minimum amount needed to physically survive. Menel looked at me incredulously and said, "I have no idea how you survived in a place like this for over ten years," as he went out into the woods to find us some food (and test his bow). He'd probably be back with something before it got dark.

Menel had always been pretty skilled at a variety of things, but he had taken an even greater leap forward in the past two years. He could pull tricks like sneaking up behind a wolf stalking its prey, and surprising it by petting it on the back. It really was incredible. Even I couldn't do that.

Reystov and Ghelreis had also gone to look for food, except they had gone fishing at the lake. It hadn't been so long since those two had met, but it seemed that as two hardened warriors, they'd already connected on some level. They were probably having some kind of conversation, or maybe just

sitting there saying nothing with their fishing lines dangling into the water.

Starting tomorrow, we would probably find ourselves in situations without adequate access to food regularly. We were heading into completely untrodden land. It would be a treacherous and difficult journey. All of us understood that this place, guarded by Gus—who was currently cooped up in his room to engrave Signs on all of our equipment—could be our final safe haven.

“Finally finished,” I said with a sigh. I had been cleaning up the kitchen area with Al as I waited for the others to return.

For the past two years, the only one here had been Gus. In addition to being unable to feel heat or cold, Gus never got hungry or tired, so the kitchen was completely covered in dust. After wrapping a cloth around my mouth, I’d dashed around doing the routine I was used to. Cleaning was something I’d done a lot of while helping Mary. The temple was big, so there were quite a lot of places that needed it.

“You could have left it to me.” Al’s expression was a little complicated. He seemed kind of surprised that his master the Paladin would do housework.

“It was faster to do it together. Besides, what about you? You’re royalty.”

“Only in name,” Al said as he raised one hand and spun it in a small circle. It was a dwarven gesture of mild disagreement. “Everyone in the clan treated me very well, but we were still poor. I learned to repair, to craft, and much more. Many times I thought, ‘Why was I not born as a simple workshop lad?’”

“If you’d been born as a workshop lad, you would have imagined this instead.” I placed my hand dramatically against my forehead and said in an exaggerated, serious voice, “Could it be that I am actually the last prince of a fallen land, with a mission to resurrect my kingdom?”

Al laughed out loud. “I’d like to tell that version of myself that it’s not actually as good as it sounds!”

“Yeah. You’re not kidding.” Dragon slaying was not my idea of fun in real life. “But you’re still going to go ahead with it.”

“Yes, I am.” Al’s eyes were clear. As usual, he looked quiet and gentle on the outside. But the self-deprecating impression he had once given off was now

completely dormant.



“In truth, they all miss their old home,” Al said. “They want to go back, and they want to *take* it back. But they’ve been through so much that even wishing for that is now more than they’re capable of. I probably understand that better than anyone.”

I remembered the expressions of the many dwarves I’d met so far, as well as the joy I’d felt upon returning to my own home.

“That’s why I want to go,” he continued. “I want to show them all that they can take back their old home, that it’s okay to try. If by risking my life I can light a fire in everyone’s hearts, I think that would be a very wonderful thing.”

I nodded quietly. It took kindness and courage to say something like that so earnestly. It occurred to me that perhaps a person like this was the most suited to being a king.

“But it seems that I’ve gotten you involved in it, and—”

“No, you haven’t.” I denied it immediately. That was definitely wrong. “I knew I’d have to fight. If I abandoned everything here and rushed to protect myself, I wouldn’t be able to face my parents or Gus.”

After all, the three of them had taken on the High King with all his formidable strength, betting on the slim chance of victory.

“And I wouldn’t know *what* to say to my god.”

God gave me one more chance out of pity for the regret carried by my soul. If, in full knowledge of the fate that would eventually befall me, I once again shrunk away from risk and feared stepping forward, slowly coming to the same end as before where I was afraid to venture anywhere, how could I possibly face my god then?

“I have something I want to do someday,” I said.

“Something you want to do?”

“Yeah.”

I didn't want glory. I didn't want wealth. I was even prepared to throw away happiness. There was only one thing I wanted.

"I want to hold my head up high. One day, when I return to the god of the flame, I want to hold my head up high, acting just a little bit cool, you know..."

To stand facing that expressionless god with confidence, not feeling the least bit hesitant—

"And say, I was able to live a proper life, and it's all thanks to you."

And thank her as directly as possible.

Al listened quietly as I spoke.

"So I won't run from the dragon. I'll fight. And it's because of you, Al, that I was able to make that decision." What would have happened to me if I hadn't heard Al's shout of resolve back then? Who knows—I might even have chosen the wrong path. "So thank you."

Al smiled. "Thank *you*, sir. It was you who made me your squire and taught me confidence and courage. I swear on this dagger you have given me that no matter how this may end, I will never regret that decision."

Feeling very slightly embarrassed, I nodded.

In the battles ahead of us, circumstances weren't always going to allow us to fight while protecting or being considerate of each other. I was glad to hear that he was mentally prepared.

"Yeah. I'm counting on you, Al."

"Yes, sir!"

We shook hands once again. Then, I heard someone calling out from somewhere a good distance away outside my window. Apparently Menel had come back.

Al ran to the window, peered out, and let out a cry of surprise. "He's got a deer! A deer!"

"A deer?!" How had he hunted *that* so fast?! "Quick, let's get everything ready to butcher it!"

“Yes, sir!”

Things suddenly got hectic.



Fat dripped from the roasted deer’s thigh onto the fire and hissed. A gorgeous aroma filled the air. The wild vegetables to go with it had been washed, cut, and were already sauteing slowly in the pot.

“Wow...” Al was visibly excited. Menel looked a little bit triumphant, and Reystov and Ghelreis were unusually quiet.

“Hahah. No hard feelings, ya?” Menel slapped them on the shoulders annoyingly as a joke. The two of them knocked away Menel’s hands simultaneously with grumpy looks on their faces, causing Gus to burst out laughing.

They hadn’t caught a thing.

“It was bad luck.”

“Mm.”

They both looked in too much of a bad mood for that to be true.

Incidentally, I wasn’t sure about Ghelreis, but Reystov’s hobby was fishing. In his spare time, I often saw him with his line in the water, but he’d pretty much never split any catches with me, so I had a reasonable idea of his skill level.

“I mean,” I started, “it’s not like everyone’s expecting you to be great at fishing just because you’re a strong warrior—”

“It was bad luck.”

“Uh...”

“You hear me? Bad luck.”

“Y-Yeah,ahaha, terrible,” I said awkwardly, deciding not to push it.

I’d known him to put some seasonal flowers into the empty wicker basket that should have held the fish and give it to Anna or someone, saying it was a flower offering to the gods. Personally, I thought that was pretty nice and romantic, so I really didn’t see a problem with him never catching anything, but

from his perspective he probably wanted to get better at it.

“Right, should be ready to start now,” Menel said.

The way to eat an animal that was roasted whole like this was to cut off parts with a knife as they finished cooking. We also had holy bread, so our evening meal was something like sandwiches, filled with sauteed vegetables and the roasted venison we’d carved off. We’d left the extra meat to smoke so we could keep it for tomorrow onwards.

“Okay, let’s eat.” I said grace to the good gods as usual and tucked in.

“Sir Meneldor, I must ask, where and how did you kill this deer?”

“I was walking along animal trails, keeping quiet and hidden, and just bumped right into it.”

Al seemed surprised. “Right into it?!”

“Ya. Didn’t have time to think about anything, so I just fired on reflex, and it was like the arrow was sucked right into the sweet spot.”

“That is most fortunate.” Gus ran his fingers through his ghostly beard as he nodded.

“The blessings of the fae god were with you.”

“Not with us, though.”

“Mm.”

“How about you just own up and admit you suck at fishing? You’ll feel a lot better.”

“J-Just bad luck.”

“Give it up!”

Not wanting to get involved, all I could do was sit back and laugh awkwardly.



I used a knife to scrape some rock salt into the bread stuffed full of venison and sauteed wild vegetables and took a large bite. The sandwich was absolutely delicious, oozing with hot meat juices. And the atmosphere was lively and cheerful.

For some reason, I remembered the time when Blood and Mary were still around. My chest tightened a little with a helpless feeling of nostalgia.

After our meal was over and everyone had returned to their rooms, I wandered outside on my own. Under the starry sky, I sat in front of Mary and Blood's graves and spoke to them inside my heart about all kinds of things.

I'm back, I said. You not being here makes me uneasy, but I'm doing okay. I made both friends and allies.

I filled them in on all kinds of things: what I'd done since I'd been gone, the people I'd met, the things I'd gained.

I remember your last words. I promise I'll continue to abide by them. I'll see you again.

I looked behind me. Gus was there. He hesitated for a while, choosing his words as he floated in place in the air. "How I wish I could go with you and help you along," he muttered in a pained voice. "It hurts me that I'm powerless when it's most crucial."

I shook my head and smiled at him. "Just those words are enough. Don't worry, Gus. Just wait here, with Blood and Mary."

"Mm. I'll be waiting for you."

"Yeah."

"And when you next come back, make sure you bring your wife with you."

"E-Enough already!"

And so my short homecoming came to an end, and my journey to slay the dragon began.

A detailed black and white illustration of a dragon and a knight in a snowy, mountainous landscape. The dragon, with its head in the upper right, has a scaly texture and a crown-like crest. The knight, positioned in the center, wears a helmet and armor, holding a sword. The scene is filled with snow and mist, with a large, jagged rock formation in the foreground. The text "Chapter One" is written in a serif font on the left side.

Chapter One

Autumn was in full swing. It was that time of year where every day was slightly colder than the last. With the wind in its sail and a sky of thin cloud above, our boat seemed to glide across the gently rolling surface of the lake. To the north, I could see the splendor of the mountain range surrounded by cloud. Those were the Rust Mountains.

“So we just have to go down this branch of the river to the west?”

“If the map is correct. If there are signs that the landscape’s changed, we’ll turn back for now.” I nodded to Menel, who was looking back at us from the foredeck. He started calling to the elementals again.

We were sailing our boat across the lake in order to circle around to the west side of the Rust Mountains.

Menel looked very natural calling to the fairies and summoning the wind to steer the boat. Elementalists and sorcerers who reached the point of being able to read and control the wind were always in demand by the coast, where ships came and went, and would never struggle for food or somewhere to sleep. Menel had probably lived off jobs like that at one point in the past.

“This rope, you do this.”

“Right!”

Toward the stern, Reystov was teaching Al about ropework and how to manage the sail. Not only did Reystov have many years of experience as an adventurer, he also had a good memory and more hobbies than most. On this kind of journey, he was as consistently useful as Menel. Al didn’t have that kind of experience, but through training with Menel and me and going on this journey, he was quickly developing the qualities of an adventurer, even if he wasn’t yet very polished.

“Alright, so, about where we’re going. Ghelreis, do you have any idea what we can expect?”

The scar-faced dwarf of few words shook his head. “I’m afraid I know of nothing after the Great Collapse.”

Gus and my parents had been bound to the city, so they also didn’t know

about anything beyond its boundaries. From here on, we would be heading into a “dark region”—territory not marked on any map, where no one had set foot.

“Except,” Ghelreis said quietly, “before the Great Collapse, there was a forest of elves to the west of the Iron Country. It was called Lothdor.”

“Lothdor... the land of flowers?”

“You understand Elvish, then?”

“Gus schooled me in it, so yes, I know the basics.”

Gus didn’t know much about the very minor languages like the one the giants used, so I was a little patchy on those, but otherwise, I knew how to use quite a few languages. Elvish especially had little linguistic change because its speakers lived long lives. Because it hadn’t changed much from the Elvish Gus knew two hundred years ago, it was one of the languages I was particularly good at.

“Lothdor... I’ve heard of it before,” Menel said from the foredeck as he looked out over the luxuriant forest along the shore. Then, he started reciting softly in Elvish. “Slip past the Iron Country, where the dwarves live in caves *Cross the radiant Rainbow Bridge, and arrive yourself in Lothdor* On silver harps and golden flutes the Remmirath play and sing.”

It was a flowery Elvish song.

“That is?”

“A song about a journey. Passed down in my old home.”

“A nostalgic song. Yes, and quite correct.”

Lothdor was a garden of many colors beyond the Rainbow Bridge, where petals from the trees scattered over chalk houses, and the babbling of the river harmonized with the sound of elven music.

Ghelreis muttered, “The elves of Lothdor didn’t get on well with the Iron Country.”

“Ahh... Because of how much they were cutting down?”

“You’re well-informed.”

“Nah, I never heard about that. Just, we had the same kind of problem where

I used to live.”

Menel explained that this was a common cause of arguments between elves and dwarves. Elves, who lived in the forests, built their lifestyles around hunting, gathering, and forest farming, and they gained a multitude of blessings by living in harmony with the fae. Meanwhile, dwarves, who lived in the mountains, chopped down trees and used fire to make charcoal, refined iron, and produced a multitude of tools. Elves preferred the trees and large open spaces in the forest, where light filtered in, while the dwarves preferred the darkness of deep caves.

“We fight all the time. Our lifestyles and cultures are too different.”

“Mm...”

This was probably a topic they both had a lot of opinions on as a half-elf and a dwarf.

“As you say, Sir Meneldor, there was fierce contention between us at times, and plenty of hatred as well. If I had a copper coin for every insult that was traded, every bitter word spoken, I would be rich. Still, they were our neighbors. We bought the grain, leather, and salt produced in the forest of elves, and we sold them mithril, iron tools, and other crafted items.”

The boat entered the wide branch of the river. To our left and right were thick expanses of forest. We let the current take us gently down the water’s path.

“The Remmirath folk were skilled in poetry and fairy techniques, and were both proud and hard to please. Just like us, in fact.” Ghelreis was being unusually talkative. “We had respect for them—and they for us, I imagine.”

As I listened to his story of elves and dwarves, I imagined what it was like two hundred years ago, during the age in which Blood and Mary lived. “And what happened to them in the Great Collapse?” I asked.

“I know at least that they remained holed up in the forest and stubbornly resisted. They never gave up. As the demons’ assault intensified, the Western Gate was closed, and the Rainbow Bridge was sealed.” Then, the unusually talkative Ghelreis spoke in a murmur. “It’s possible... It’s possible that they survived.” His words sounded like a prayer. “Elves live long lives. It’s possible

that—”

He stopped abruptly. I followed his line of sight, and I too went silent. He let out a small groan.

The garden of many colors beyond the Rainbow Bridge, where petals from the trees scattered over chalk houses and the babbling of the river harmonized with the sound of elven music, wasn't there. Ahead of our boat, the water was dark, stagnant, and turbid, and there were rows of pitifully withered trees.



For a while, no one spoke.

“Is... no one left? No one?” The words fell weakly from Ghelreis’s lips. He opened his mouth as if to shout something, then closed it tight without a sound. After spending a little while like that taking it in, he said, “It’s hard to let go.”

“Ghelreis...” Al sounded concerned for him.

But Ghelreis shook his head. “Don’t mind me, young master.”

Silence fell on the boat for a while, and an awkward atmosphere developed.

Reystov changed the subject. “Hmm. Looks like the river’s path changed over the last two hundred years.” The river was flowing through and around the large, withered trees that used to be a forest.

“Hold on,” Menel said, scrunching his face up. “I’ve seen this kind of thing before.”

After he said it, I realized as well. The dying trees, the stagnant water—this was—

“A Taboo Word...”

“Yeah,” Menel said hatefully. “If an elven lineage with a Branch name gets serious about holing themselves up in their home forest, no enemy can touch them. The enemy’s numbers or weapons don’t even matter. They’ll be misled, divided, surrounded, and picked off again and again.”

Even Blood had said to avoid fighting with an elf in the forest. That was why—

“They must’ve brought out a Taboo Word, gathered together high-level Word users, and done a ritual to rot the whole fig forest, those no-moral demon shits.”

People often think that people or groups who take an “anything goes” attitude toward fighting are strong. Some even claim that if nothing is off-limits to you when you fight, you can beat virtually anyone. In one aspect, that’s correct, and in another, it’s wrong. An “anything goes” approach to fighting is very strong in the short term, but in the long term, it’s weak. Once you use a banned move, the ban on that move is also lifted for your opponent, and their response will be ferocious. And once others perceive you as someone who will ignore both morality and good faith for the sake of your objective, you won’t even be able to form alliances with them. In fact, it can even provide them with a good excuse to join forces against you. Used improperly, “anything goes” is weak, resulting in victory and glory that is short-lived and downfall that is inevitable.

High-level goblins and high-level undead understood this logic, and despite being minions of evil gods (those gods being Illtreat—who ruled over tyranny—and Stagnate, respectively), they even had a kind of morality. That was because, when it came down to it, they lived in the same world as the rest of us.

However, this logic didn’t work on the demons, who were the minions of Dyrhygma, god of dimensions. Maybe their minds worked differently, or maybe they had different goals; whatever the case, they saw no benefit in abiding by these moral principles. They were simply monsters from another world who aimed to invade and control.

As I looked at the withered forest of the elves, I thought: *This can’t stand. We can’t let beings who think nothing of doing something like this run rampant any longer.*

“We have to destroy them.”

“Heh. What’s this now? You sound fired up.”

“What about you? Your face is like ‘now it’s on.’”

“You bet. Can’t let ’em live.” He grinned fiercely like a wild animal. It caused Al to clench a fist, and Reystov and Ghelreis to smirk slightly.

“But before that—”

“Ya.” Menel responded at once, and Reystov and Ghelreis nodded, too.

Al tilted his head to the side and looked around, puzzled. The boat was advancing through the stagnant water between withered trees. It didn’t look as though there was anything unusual at a glance.

I took Pale Moon in my hand.

“*There.*”

I thrust it into the water. At the same time, the water’s surface swelled and burst. The shining blade of my spear had pierced straight through the head of a giant serpent.



“A water serpent?!” Al cried out in surprise.

“Get over it, there’s more coming!” As Menel shouted at him, another large serpent burst out of the water on our port side. Almost simultaneously, Reystov’s sword ran through the air like a bolt of lightning. But the water heaved, and the boat lurched. It was enough for even Reystov the Penetrator to marginally miss his mark. He failed to deliver a lethal blow—

There was an almighty grunt. Ghelreis’s mace shattered the serpent’s head.

“Not good,” Menel muttered, looking around. I watched Al do the same—then draw a sharp intake of breath. Several—no, *dozens* of long, thick shapes were wavering on the surface of the murky water around us.

“Menel! Full speed!”

“On it!”

No sooner had I given the instruction than Menel was calling to the elementals to summon a powerful current and strong tailwind to move the boat. However—

“Feck, not much reply! The fairies are weak here!”

It was probably the result of this entire piece of land being cursed by the Taboo Word. The spirits of nature seemed to be slow to respond. If this was

how things were, there was a good chance that Menel's spells for use around water, like Waterwalk and Waterbreathing, wouldn't work very well, either. If our boat sank or we were knocked off it, we'd be in danger.

"Keep your focus on the spells! Reystov and Ghelreis, port side! Al, back Menel up!" I shouted out orders as I struck out with Pale Moon, then swept it sideways into another one of the serpents that had burst out of the water to starboard.

This wasn't a great situation to be in. The serpents were bleeding into the water. It was possible that the blood would draw even more of them here, and maybe other aquatic monsters as well. There was no time to hesitate. It was risky, but I decided to turn to an attack Word. I would make the blast go off underwater and take them all out in one fell swoop by the same principle as blast fishing. With my course of action decided, I chose the shortest and most powerful attack Word in my arsenal.

"Vasta—"

At that instant, the boat shook violently. My Word was disrupted. I was forced to shift my concentration to a desperate attempt to control the Word and prevent it from exploding.

The moment I did, one of the largest water serpents burst out of the water and sunk its teeth into my side.

I grunted in surprise and confusion. The boat lurched. I lost my balance. Digging my feet in didn't work. I was pulled forward. The murky surface of the water suddenly got a lot closer.

"Will?!"

There was a huge splash and I was pulled under the stagnant water.



The instant before I fell into the water, I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with air. Many people in this world couldn't swim, but fortunately, I'd been taught the basics of swimming both in this world and my previous one.

The serpent that had bitten into my side twisted in confusion. Its curved fangs

didn't have the power to puncture my mithril mail; nor did its jaw have the bite force to pressure my abdominal muscles and crush my internal organs. Muscles win again. That said, of course, if the serpent squeezed me tight and dragged me into the depths, I would definitely drown.

Bubbles rose toward the surface. In the stagnant water, opening my eyes only resulted in its muddiness filling my vision. I couldn't see. Of course, I couldn't utter any Words, either. So as I tensed up my stomach to prevent myself from being crushed, I prayed instead.

What I pictured in my mind was light and purity. In the next moment, there was a flash, and the murkiness vanished about sixty meters in every direction, transforming into water that was pure and clear.

It was the Prayer of Purification.

Having secured a usable view, I opened my eyes. The water was teeming with giant serpents, and I could see them all clearly as they swam. Several of them were gunning right for me now that I'd fallen into the water. As one aimed for my foot, I drew in my leg to dodge it and swung my arm at another trying to wrap itself around my chest, knocking it away.

It was difficult to move, like the water itself was constricting me. If I continued fighting in the water like this, sooner or later, I was going to lose. But I had already seen a way out.

As one of the snakes darted straight at me, aiming for my throat, I grabbed both its top and bottom jaws and used brute strength to tear both flesh and skin away. The giant serpent threw itself around in my hands, and its blood flowed into the purified water.

With one hand, I grabbed the one attached to my mail and held it still, drew my dagger from my belt, and sliced open its neck. More and more blood poured out into the water, turning it a cloudy red.

Then, the other serpents started to sink their teeth into the two that were shedding blood. These were not beasts; they were merely large water snakes. In other words, they were attacking me not because of the overaggressive nature characteristic of beasts and other monsters, but purely because they were predators and I was their prey. In which case, I didn't need to fight them to the

death; I just needed to provide them weaker prey, prey that was easier to attack.

A few more of them came at me separately. I killed them as well.

I'd been moving around underwater for a while, and the need to breathe was becoming hard to ignore. I endured it, hanging on until the serpents' attention had turned from me to their weakened brothers, and then I started to swim for the surface. My clothes had absorbed water and clung to me, feeling incredibly heavy. I desperately thrashed upward.

Finally, my head broke the surface next to the boat. I gasped loudly for air. How many minutes had I been fighting underwater? The air tasted so good.

"Sir Will!" Al immediately threw me a rope.

I grabbed onto it and somehow made it back onto the boat, water dripping from every part of me. I breathed hard with both my hands flat against the deck. My entire body craved oxygen.

"Will!"

"You okay?"

I managed a nod back at everyone calling to me. I spotted Pale Moon, which I'd let go of just before falling in. As I thought about how glad I was that I hadn't dropped it into the water, I got my breathing together, faced the water, and—

"*Vastare.*" I blasted an attack spell into it with all my might.

This time, my aim was true. A vortex of destruction formed under the highly conductive water. The blast swept through it and slammed into the serpents, turning their flesh to mush and crushing their bones. The boat rocked badly.

I let out a puff of air. "That should do it."

Not a moment later, the remains of many serpents floated to the surface.

"God. No mercy from you," Menel muttered, astounded.

Well, sure, I thought. I can't exactly leave enemies that are actively attacking our boat alive.

"Menel, let's move out of here. Also, I think we've mostly gotten rid of them,

but everyone be on your guard.”

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

“U-Um... The water turned very clean all of a sudden.”

“Huh? It’s just the Prayer of Purification.”

“Huh?” Al looked as if he was totally confused, and so was I. “Umm, the Prayer of Purification is normally for one bottle of water or a pond at most...”

“Oh...” So the power was the problem.

Menel slapped Al on the shoulder as the latter looked at me, bewildered. “It’s just brute force. Get used to it.”

“Wha?”

“It’s his standard battle tactic: do everything with a barbaric level of force. He doesn’t even think anything of it. Better get used to it.”

Al hesitated.

“That’s what I did,” Menel added with an expression as if he’d attained some higher understanding.

“A barbaric level of force?” I said. “Come on, that’s a bit mean.”

“What do you call it, then?”

“I have more power and moves than a barbarian, so it’s *more* than a barbaric level of force.” I gave him a smug grin. Menel shook his head without a word, and Al nodded at him with a complicated expression. “J-... What’s that face supposed to be?!”

“Disbelief, Sir Even Barbarianer.”

As we joked around with each other like that—

“This change in landscape’s the problem.” Reystov’s muttered words cut our idle chatter short.



He was right—this area was very different from our map and the information

we had, both of which were two centuries out of date. The stagnant river had changed its course and completely swallowed up the forest that used to be here. The river banks were now sopping wetlands, and I couldn't see a single place where it would be easy to land our boat. On top of that, this place was home to many dangerous creatures, like those water serpents. It provided a stark reminder why these were dark regions that mankind hadn't ventured into for the past two hundred years.

"Ghelreis, do you see anything you recognize here?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "This is all just too..."

"Oh!" Al suddenly exclaimed. "What about those, Ghelreis?"

Everyone looked in the direction Al was pointing: down at the water made clear by the Prayer of Purification. I looked down, and under the shimmering surface I could see the remnants of a line of buildings.

"Hmm." Ghelreis looked at those ruins and started to think.

"What do you think?" Al prompted after a pause.

"The architecture of these buildings..." Ghelreis said slowly. "They're of elven construction. I'm sure of it."

"Ohh, nice, brother!"

"Good eye."

"Yeah. Good going, Al."

"I really didn't do anything," Al said with some embarrassment as we all praised him.

"Which would that be on the map, then?"

"Probably this..."

While allowing our boat to drift slowly away from the serpent carcasses, we all investigated the map together. Once we'd pinned down our rough location, we started moving again.

However, because this whole area was polluted by the Taboo Word, steering with the spell Tailwind wasn't working out very well. Even if I used the Prayer of

Purification to clean the air and water surrounding us, it wasn't as if that would immediately do something about the weakened fae. Some improvement could be expected if I factored in Menel's skills as an elementalist and his power as a future Lord of the Woods; however, Reystov correctly pointed out that if we made large changes, there was a chance that the demons would notice.

Because of that, we decided to turn to more primitive methods. We stopped relying on the sail and decided to drop oars and row. Menel stood at the boat's stern, gripping the tiller and calling out to us. We fell into rhythm with his voice and rowed forward as two teams on the port and starboard sides.

The water was dark and stagnant. There were lines of trees withered white, all large and hundreds of years old, and they made me think of the corridors of columns called stoas within ancient temples. It was a forest where even sound had died, except for the occasional unsettling noise from aquatic creatures. At some point a thin white haze had covered the area. We could only see a vague outline of the Rust Mountains.

The boat continued forward amid the sounds of oars creaking and pushing through the water. There was some conversation at first, but even that lessened as time went on. Around the time that the dismal atmosphere of our surroundings finally caused us all to go silent, I sensed something in the water to starboard.

When I looked, I saw bubbles forming, and then several hands appeared, followed by horribly pale arms, extending out of the stagnated water. Some had rotted, while others were all bone. The arms began to struggle and cling to the boat. The vessel groaned.



As our boat wobbled, Reystov and Ghelreis each brought out their weapons. They were magical weapons, newly acquired in the city of the dead, and would probably work well against undead.

"Enemies?" Menel was especially cool-headed. He took the time to ask me, even as he stood ready to draw his weapon.

"No." I shook my head. "They're just suffering." I extended my hand to one of the arms grasping the boat. The arm had become bloated with water and stank

of a raw, fishy smell. As I took its hand, I heard Al's breath catch. "It's okay," I said, hoping that my intent would get through to the undead. "It's okay now."

You don't have to suffer anymore. You don't have to keep resenting. You don't have to keep trying.

"You won't wish misfortune on anyone anymore. You won't curse them, and you won't make them suffer." I felt the strength leaving the arm I was holding onto and all the other arms around the boat. "I'll handle everything somehow."

It'll be okay now, even if you don't keep on trying.

It'll be okay, even if you don't keep on protecting.

It'll be okay, even if you don't fight.

It'll be okay, even if you don't bear the burden.

You can let it go. So—

"Please, rest long and easy." I spoke each word slowly and prayed. "Gracefeel, god of the flame. Repose and guidance."

Divine Torch lit up in the cloudy sky. The miraculous floating flame began to guide the wandering souls back to the eternal cycle. Several pale-blue specters appeared, fading softly into vision. They had beautiful braided hair, pointed ears that reminded one of bamboo leaves, and handsome features.

"———"

They faced us in silence and gave us a proud and elegant bow.

"Ohh..." Ghelreis's voice trembled. This must have been exactly what the elves of Remmirath Branch had looked like in bygone days.

"———"

They tried to speak; perhaps they had something they wanted to tell us. But it wasn't to be. Their slumber at the bottom of the river had stolen the language from their throats. It was a hard sight to witness, but they were graceful in spite of this. They gave a beautiful shrug, then pointed in a direction with a slender finger. Spinning the finger in a circle—perhaps that meant "as fast as you can?"

"We should go that way? As swiftly as possible?"

A nod came back. Then, the one standing at the front raised two fingers, made a fist, and held it in front of his heart. The motion was seamless.

“Will, that’s...”

“Don’t worry, I know what it means.” I returned them the same gesture. It was a friendly gesture of parting. “May the blessing of the flame be with you,” I said. Then, with gentle smiles, the ancient elves of Remmirath faded and disappeared.

As Al, Ghelreis, and Reystov stood in silence, Menel spoke suddenly. “Let’s go. Full speed in that direction. Now. Hurry!”

“Huh?”

“Don’t trust an elf’s sense of time!” Sounding slightly panicked, Menel called to the elementals with a quite forceful tone and used the Tailwind spell once more. Then, as he applied the Waterwalk technique on himself extra thoroughly, he shouted, “You know those stories you hear? About when elves say, ‘Wait a bit,’ it means, ‘In a year or so’? Those are true!” The boat rocketed forward at incredible speed, cutting through the stagnant water and advancing through the mist. “Those guys with their chill sense of time just told you ‘as fast as possible,’ brother! You better—”

A scream reached us from somewhere deep in the mist.

“I feckin’ knew it!” Menel cursed, and then yelling loudly, he sprinted into the mist with the quickness of a skipping stone.

Menel didn’t normally speak when he was fighting. Shouting a war cry brought out your power and helped to negate fear, but that was a warrior’s way of fighting, not a hunter’s. Menel moved in silence and killed in silence. There were probably two reasons he was raising his voice now despite that: to communicate his presence to the screamer and to allow us to follow him without losing track of where he was. Leaving his voice as our guide, he led the way farther and farther into the mist.

“Row! Hurry!”

Due to the timing of when we heard the scream, the Waterwalk spell hadn’t been cast on anyone except Menel. He probably wasn’t able to cast it on

everyone with a single spell in this place where the fairies' boon was weak. Since the situation was already difficult, it was only natural that Menel, who had the most precise grasp of what was going on, should take the lead.

We pushed harder against the oars and rowed faster. The bank approached rapidly. It was wetland with sparse patches of weak-looking plants growing here and there, and there was no clear water's edge separating it from the river.

"Easy! Watch your blades in the mud!" I called out and lifted my oar. We all knew what we were meant to do. We quickly jumped out of the boat, submersing ourselves up to the thighs in stagnant water, and pushed the boat up onto the bank.

Immediately grabbing our weapons, we started sprinting one after another. My feet kept sinking into the mire. I forced them up as I ran. The ground was terrible. If a battle unfolded, my ability to move around might be heavily restricted. As I worried about this, we all pushed forward as a group.

Before long, we heard an aggressive yell, then the dull sound of flesh and bone being cut through. On the other side of the mist, Menel had used his longsword to behead a giant, eyeless serpent that had burst out of the lake of mud to attack him. The snake's head spun and splatted into the mire.

On the ground beside Menel was the figure of a person I didn't know. She had long, blonde hair that had frayed and spread—perhaps her hair had been braided and come undone—and long, pointed ears. It was an elf. Did one of them survive?!

"Menel, is she oka—"

"Not yet!" Menel shouted quickly. The next moment, several serpents burst out of the mud on either side of him. He dodged them as they bit at him, his tied silver hair flowing as he moved. In concert with that movement, he swung his sword at one of the serpents, but the blade failed to cut all the way through its body. It dug in and stuck there, and then, the next moment, something astonishing happened. The first serpent, made headless by Menel's sword, lunged at his legs in an attempt to coil itself around them.

Cursing under his breath, Menel was forced to let go of his sword. He kicked away the headless serpent trying to entangle itself around his legs and leaped

away from his attackers. With the Waterwalk technique cast upon him, his movements were graceful even in this bog.

“It’s coming! Get ready!” He helped the golden-haired elf to her feet and retreated in our direction. The serpents followed hot on his heels. And from the way they moved, finally, the complete picture became clear to me. *It wasn’t serpents.* Under the mud, all those eyeless serpentine necks, each thicker than a man’s torso, were connected to the body of an even larger serpent. The many-headed giant serpent bared its yellowed teeth and repeatedly lashed out its red tongues, threatening us.

“What the?!”

“The ruler of the bog...”

“A hydra.”

Once everyone grasped the nature of their opponent, their cautiousness of that enormous, bizarre body was plain to see. Then, the wound where one of its necks had been severed by Menel began to bubble and foam. Slowly, a new head began to form.

“*Sagitta Flammeum!*” Instinctively, I cast a Word. The flaming arrow, constructed by Words and born from mana, landed a direct hit on the neck trying to regenerate. There was a violent explosion, and the hydra twisted in pain. Then it howled. The air quivered with the sheer force of the noise.

“Whoa!” Menel and the elf he had rescued, the pair with the most sensitive hearing, covered their ears. I didn’t have the time to pay attention to them. My eyes darted back to the head. It had been burned, and the scorched tissue had stopped regenerating.

“Fire works! Al, Ghelreis, Reystov! To the front!”

The enraged hydra bore down on us. Everyone drew their weapons, readied their shields, and advanced.

“Menel, take her and retreat!”

“Got it!” Menel pulled back, swapping places with the advancing front.

I couldn’t be there with them. Since I had to keep an eye on all the serpent

heads spreading out in all directions and prevent them from regenerating as they were chopped off, I had to stand well back for a good view.

“So I’m at the back...”

I’d always been the kind to rush forward shouting. I’d managed to get through all my battles that way. Fighting from this position was something I hardly ever did. Now wasn’t the time to get sentimental about it, but it felt like a surprisingly fresh experience.

“I’ll burn them as you cut them off! The front’s up to you!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood!”

“No sweat.”

They all responded. And so the battle began.



The flash of a blade, swift yet concealing tremendous power, took off one of the hydra heads. That slash belonged to Reystov. He had severed a mass of flesh and bone that was as wide as a trunk and thrashing around wildly. It couldn’t be accomplished with any ordinary level of training or skill. In fact, even Menel, who had reached an impressive level of skill himself, had already failed once and had his sword taken. But Reystov continued dropping heads one after another, making it look easy. I continued to cast *Sagitta Flammeum* after him.

His frightening level of skill didn’t seem to have dulled in the least. And he wasn’t done. A brief but energetic grunt accompanied his next slash, and one of the heads that the hydra had raised high into the air far out of the reach of his sword split vertically down its length. This had to be the effect of the new Word that Gus had engraved into Reystov’s beloved blade. Judging by what it had done, it was most likely a Word of Gus’s own making based on Extension and Sharpness. My senses as a user of magic told me that a sharp blade, formed out of mana for just an instant, had cut beyond the length of Reystov’s sword to split the hydra’s skin.

Gus really had good judgment. That upgrade was a very good match for Reystov. Given that the user was already at a high and stable level, simply giving them a sharper sword with a longer reach was a far better idea than trying to increase their power or giving them the ability to shoot fire or lightning.



It made it hard to judge the sword's range from an outside perspective, making it a nuisance for enemies and incredibly useful for allies.

"Sagitta Flammeum!" Another head fell, and I followed it with another fire arrow. As long as there was no unusual change in circumstances, I was planning to go with this single strategy for the rest of this battle.

On the face of it, using a whole variety of Words according to the fine details of the enemy's situation moment by moment might appear to be a wise approach and good support. But in actual fact, following the full four steps of "see, think, decide, use" in sequence would make you slow to act. It was better to choose a reasonably effective, short magic and follow just the two steps "see, then use" over and over. The front guard would also feel more at ease knowing exactly what was about to come flying over their heads.

A poor player overthinks the wrong decisions. And at least in a situation like battle, where things change constantly, being stubbornly simple about everything has fewer ways to fail.

I cast *Sagitta Flammeum* multiple times in succession. Double casting as Gus had taught me, I drew Signs with my right hand, guiding the magic to make sure I wouldn't hit the front guard by mistake.

I was just repeating the same words and the same characters in a routine fashion, so there was no delay or hesitation between each one. On the contrary, the more I repeated this, the faster I became.

Several arrows hit in succession. The hydra's remaining heads screeched loudly in anger. One of the outside heads swept towards the three at the front like a whip, trying to knock them away. It was Ghelreis that braced for it with his large shield. With his short yet sturdy, barrel-like body, he held the shield at an angle. Viewed from the side, his body and the shield formed a shape like an upside-down letter "y."

Sparks scattered everywhere as the hydra's sharp, hard scales scraped across the huge shield. Ghelreis wasn't blocking it; he was deflecting it upwards. The other two crouched down behind him, and the hydra's swipe sliced through air.

Ghelreis roared. A powerful strike from his mace slammed into the hydra's

open body. Hydras had a strong ability to regenerate, but their internal organs couldn't handle powerful impacts. The hydra recoiled, and attempted to fight back with several of its heads, but Ghelreis refused to move from the spot, as if he were rooted to the earth. In addition to his dwarven physique, his Sword-smasher armor set probably had some kind of magical effect to help him hold his ground.

“Now, young master!”

“Right!”

As the hydra's attention was on Ghelreis, Al charged forward. He held his halberd of immense strength behind him, then swung it diagonally upwards, crashing it into one of the hydra's heads. There was a sickeningly loud sound of shattering bone and scattering flesh. The result was less a slash wound and more a violent rupture. The head bent dramatically backwards, half-torn off.

Al yelled out as he pulled the long handle of his weapon back towards him and unleashed another strike. This time, the head was torn away completely. Unlike Reystov's clean severing, the cross section left by Al's attack was a mess, as if a giant had used all his strength to rip the hydra's head away from its body.

While feeling a little disturbed, I cast another fire arrow. I heard a sigh behind me from Menel. “Well, looks like I'm not gonna be needed anymore,” he grumbled. “Whatever. Didn't want to waste arrows anyway.”

It was already clear which side had the edge.



While protecting Al from the hydra's attacks, Ghelreis dealt steady blows to the hydra to make things harder for it and weaken it a little. Al secured a position where he was well protected by Ghelreis and could afford to take large swings. He sent another of the hydra's heads flying. And whenever there was a spare moment, there was a brilliant flash from Reystov's sword out of nowhere. Reystov was so good at hopping in and out of range that I kind of wanted to watch and learn. As for me, my only job was to watch them and repeatedly shoot guided fire arrows.

“Hey, you alright?” Menel was giving encouragement to the elf, who seemed

to have been wounded, as he kept watch over the area. It looked as if he was just kicking back while the rest of us fought, but deliberately not getting involved with the fight and keeping a look out was an important job in itself.

In a pressing situation like battle, it's only natural to want to join in and help if you have the ability, but if too many people get involved at once, it increases the risk of friendly fire and collateral damage. It's an valuable decision to choose to stand by so that your allies don't have to be concerned about additional enemies joining the fray and can concentrate on the battle before them. I wanted to believe that nothing would be crazy enough to jump into the middle of a hydra battle, but this was a dark region where people had never ventured. There was no way of knowing what might be lurking here.

"Sagitta Flammeum!" The three at the front continued to deal severe blows to the hydra, and each time, I delivered a flaming arrow to the wound site to increase the damage.

It wasn't long after that that all the hydra's heads were severed. It sank into the bog without even giving up a final scream.

"D-Did we kill it?!"

"Remain on your guard. Hydra venom is so deadly that even most miracles cannot cure it."

"Yeah. Snakes like this can struggle wildly even after all the heads are cut off sometimes."

"E-Even once all the heads are cut off?"

"Yeah. Won't help anyone to let it spite you just before it dies."

After checking that the three at the front were on their guard, I turned to look at what was going on behind me. "Menel."

"Will, need you right now. She's bitten!"

I hurriedly ran through the bog over to them and had a look at the elf Menel was holding in his arms. Her frayed blonde hair was covered in mud, and her violet eyes were hazed over and unfocused. Although she was wearing plain travelers' clothing that was covered in mud, she was clearly very beautiful. She

had a well-defined nose bridge and slender jaw line, and looked to me like the perfect example of a female elf in every aspect. If we'd met under normal circumstances, I might have been a little stunned. If she wasn't twitching and drooling from deadly poison like she was right now!

"Stay with me!" No wonder Menel hadn't let her out of his arms! No wonder he hadn't been fighting! Panicking, I started to pray for the Miracle of Antidote.

"There's... no hope..." The elf extended a quivering hand to stop me. "It's hydra... poison..."

I grumbled. This wasn't good. Not just the Miracle of Antidote, but any prayer with the power to heal could fail to have an effect if the target rejected it. That was because the good gods didn't want their healing to be used for torture or extending life when it wasn't desired. There were many ways for an inventive person to put the ability to cure poison or heal wounds to evil use.

It had to be difficult for her to even speak right now, yet she still turned down treatment, preferring to die without fruitless attempts to cling onto life. Elves really were dignified.

As I was wondering how I could convince her, Menel took her hand and lowered it. "Don't speak."

"No... You must... North... village of... others..."

"Ugh! Dammit, accept the treatment, wood-kin!"

"Wood...kin...?" The elf's eyes, which were starting to lose their focus, opened wide and took in Menel. She met the direct gaze of his jade eyes.

"This is no ordinary priest," he said. "Friend of the forest, you will survive. Accept this miracle." His tone was final. "Pray."

The elf was barely conscious now, but as Menel spoke those words to her while holding her hand, I was certain, although it was very slight, that I saw her nod her head.

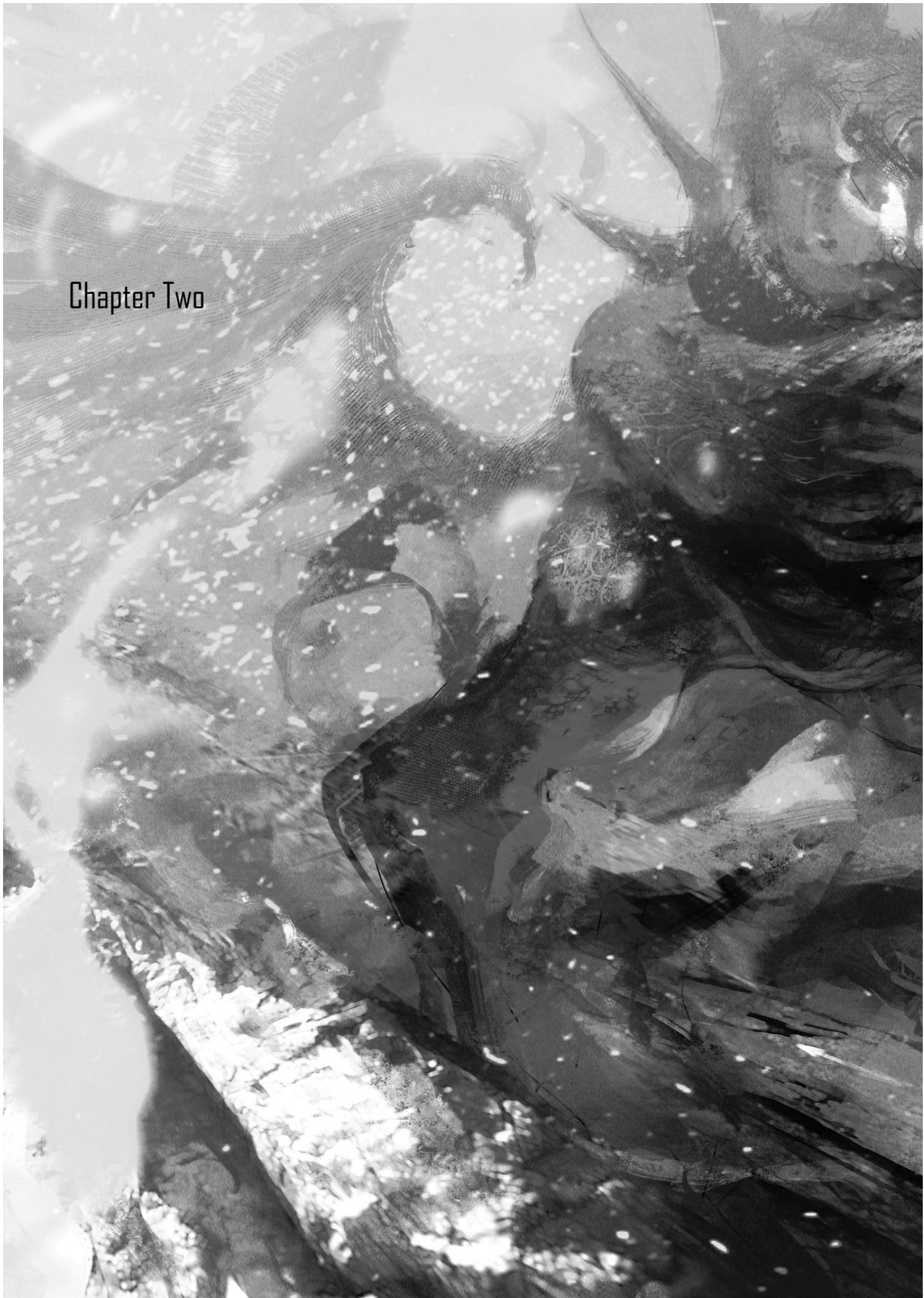
And so, I offered a prayer to my god.

God, if you may, please heal this noble elf.

The prayer became a miracle, and the miracle became a faint light that shone

down upon her body. Very soon after, the unconscious elven woman's breathing slowly started returning to normal.

Chapter Two



We made sure that the hydra was definitely dead and that the female elf had been healed. Then I handed my gear to Al, pulled the elf's arms up, crouched down, and lifted her over my shoulders. It was like the fireman's carry that firemen and lifeguards in my previous world used for transporting people in need of rescue. It made a person easy to lift and fast to move around with.

We had to move immediately. We'd fought a rowdy battle and gotten blood everywhere. Already we could hear the raspy screeching of monstrous birds circling the cloudy sky overhead in search of carrion. If we didn't leave this place as soon as possible, we were guaranteed to encounter new enemies drawn here by the smell of blood.

After recovering his longsword from the hydra's carcass, Menel said, "Wait a sec."

"We don't have much time," Reystov replied with a dubious look.

"I'll be quick." Menel wrapped a cloth around his hand, pulled out his dagger, and started doing some kind of work on the hydra carcass. He inserted the blade carefully into the joint behind its fangs in its upper jaw, equivalent to the joint between the cheek and the ear in humans. "Good," he said, and he poured the jet-black bodily fluid from the hydra into a small bottle he had with him.

"Is that... venom from its venom gland?" I asked.

"Bet we'll find a use for it."

"Be careful."

I'd learned a little about poisons from Blood and Gus. They were hard to handle; storing them while preserving their toxicity and making intelligent use of them when needed were both difficult tasks that required proper knowledge.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

Menel was a talented hunter and a warrior of the forest. He knew more than me about how to handle poisons from plants, animals, and beasts, so I was probably worrying for nothing.

"Sorry about that. Let's go."

With that, we trekked back to the boat through the bog. Based on their

physique and equipment, Al and Ghelreis looked like they were finding it difficult to walk, but I felt as if my situation was even worse, with the weight of the elf over my shoulders pressing my feet deeper into the mud. I used my strength to force my way through. Muscle power came in useful even at times like these. I was so glad I'd trained!

"That hydra..." Al mumbled as we walked. "What a fight that was." His hands were trembling slightly. Now that I thought about it, that was the first time he'd fought anything so large.

"Absolutely," Ghelreis said. "We would have been in some trouble had we not fought it together."

"That old champion Berkeley killed one single-handed," Reystov chipped in. "So they say."

The Berkeley Tale of Valor was an old epic that Bee told from time to time. In the days when the traces of myth were still common in the world and the evil gods' minions were prevalent, the name of the wandering warrior Berkeley was spoken everywhere in the ancient kingdoms.

Berkeley served Volt, god of lightning and judgment. He was brave and noble and defeated many monsters, wielding his immense power for the sake of innocent people. However, he had an intense fondness for the pleasures of the flesh, and one day, a twist of fate and the jealousy of a wicked woman conspired to create the conditions for his downfall. In many ways, he was the perfect example of a hero.

"Starting to doubt it now I've seen the real thing, though. No one could take one of them down alone... Or, hmm." Menel turned to look at me.

"What?"

"No, was just thinking you could probably manage it..." All the others turned to look at me with interest, so I decided to give it serious thought.

It would probably be easy if I could blast the hydra with a powerful Word from outside its range. However, it was unrealistic to think that I could spot a hydra living in a marshland of swirling mist and attack it without it noticing. So I was going to have to assume I'd be running into it in the bog itself. I also

decided to assume I'd been anticipating fighting a hydra and had come properly prepared with weapons enhanced with fire Signs or something.

If I protected myself with a good magic shield and spent the opening stages of the battle just chopping off as many of its heads as I could, or if I did what Berkeley did and held one of its edgemost necks against my side, using it as a shield so I could be the one dragging the hydra around, maybe it would work out somehow? With several layers of physical enchantment spells and blessings, it would probably be alright.

Of course, given that I would be fighting a hydra alone in a swamp, there would always be a danger of something unexpected killing me. But still, even without considering the dirty trick of pulling out Overeater—

"I think my chances wouldn't be too bad," I said.

Menel bent his neck dramatically back to look straight up at the heavens and apologized to Volt for having doubted the accomplishments of his hero.



We all returned to the boat, covered in mud, and loaded our gear into it. At the same time, we laid out sheets and blankets for the still-unconscious elf (whose name we were yet to discover) and wrapped her up in them to keep her from getting cold. Then it was back into the thigh-high mud to push the boat back to the river.

Slowly, the boat began moving again, following the current.

"Hmm..."

"Eck. Mud everywhere. Didn't realize we were this bad."

"Ahh! Leeches?!"

"Burn 'em off."

"I'll get some water and things ready."

We'd all undergone a mud baptism, so we used benediction, fairy blessings, magic, and more to get rid of the mud and make ourselves look completely decent again. This was important. If we contracted a disease in a place like this, the word "hassle" wouldn't come close to describing the problems we would

face. I could heal people with benediction, but it would still take time for them to get their strength back. There were even some troublesome diseases that could lie dormant with no visible symptoms for some time and flare up suddenly later.

“There we go.”

Once we were all mostly clean, we finished dealing with the remaining aftermath of the battle. Without a word, Reystov took the helm and kept watch for us.

“So, about this elf.” I took another look at the elf wrapped up in blankets. She had the kind of rich golden hair that I imagined nature’s spirits would like. Her fine-featured face was pale and looked haggard. Her violet eyes were still lowered, but she was definitely breathing.

We had finally reached a point where we could pause for a moment to talk about her. Considering the precedent of the water serpents, it was admittedly hard to call the boat a safe place to be, but it was better than anywhere else. We couldn’t expect anywhere in these dark regions to be completely safe.

“Is she a survivor of the elves?”

“I imagine so.”

“Look, we’re not gonna get far talking without her.” Menel showed no restraint. Saying, “Hey. Wake up,” he tapped the elf on her cheeks, which were like a work of art, hard enough to make a slapping sound. When he saw she still wasn’t waking up, he brought a little bottle containing strong, distilled alcohol up to her full lips and poured it into her mouth without hesitation.

The effect was instant. The blonde-haired elf bolted awake with wide eyes, coughing violently from the liquid’s intense strength. She looked left and right, trying to make sense of what had happened to her.

“Wakey-wakey,” Menel said, grinning like a trouble-making kid. The rest of us had frozen a bit, shocked at the way Menel handled it.

“Wh-What was that?!” she sputtered.

“Woke you up with a spicy kiss. How you feeling, my fellow forest buddy?”

Splitting headache? Wanna puke?”

“G-Gods, you’re vulgar! You’re an offense to the ear and an ache upon the brain!”

Though I had healed her with benediction, she was in recovery from a near-death state. She had to be feeling drained, but that apparently hadn’t taken the fight out of her.

“Well, you sound well enough.”

“And... And did you just say... k-kiss? You... You didn’t dare!”

“Calm down. You smooched this bottle.”

She went red to the tips of her ears and railed against Menel in the fastest Elvish I’d ever heard. I couldn’t make it all out with my skill at the language, but I could tell it was a barrage of intense and bitter sarcasm. Menel let it run off him like water off a duck’s back.

Al and Ghelreis didn’t seem to be proficient in Elvish and were unable to keep up with their conversation, and Reystov had his hand on the tiller and was keeping well out of it. I thought about saying something to the pair of them so we could all move on, but apparently even Menel had the sense to know that things had gone on long enough. As the elf paused for breath for a moment, Menel placed his hand over his heart with a polished motion and gave her a greeting in Old Elvish. “*The stars shine on the hour of our meeting.*”

The elf frowned, retracted her sharp tongue, and responded with the standard formal greeting in a similarly refined manner.

Menel shrugged. “Sorry for shocking you. It’s just how I was raised. I’m Meneldor of Ithil.”

“Swift-winged heavenly eagle of the silver moon, I am Dineland of Remmirath.”

“Enchanting silent tune of the net of shining stars, may our meeting be blessed.”

Spoken in beautiful, rhythmical Elvish, it was a rhyming exchange in the traditional format.

“So you *can* behave normally,” Dinelind said, frustrated.

“Elven greetings aren’t my style.” He shrugged. “No more, please.”

Dinelind gave a small, resigned snort, smiling with her violet eyes. “Alright.”

Then she looked at me, who had been completely left behind by the conversation, and switched to slightly dated Western Common Speech. It was the way of speaking I was most familiar with: the language spoken in Blood and Mary’s time. “My apologies. Are you the leader of this group? It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Dinelind.” *Dee-neh-lihnd*.

“William G. Maryblood.”

“You saved my life. You all have my deepest gratitude.”

She gave me a graceful bow.



The dark, thick, stagnant river flowed slowly. Carried by the water’s flow, the boat progressed to the north between withered trees that reminded me of bones exposed to the elements. A slight current of air was filling its sail. That was because Menel had used the Tailwind spell again. It seemed the fairies had regained a little of their power.

“So then we...”

After introducing ourselves to Dinelind, we explained to her that we were on a journey to kill the foul-dragon Valacirca and the mountain demons. She was astonished. “Just the five of you? Are you serious?”

“You think we’d come all the way out here for a joke?”

“You might. I admit that William over there seems unlikely to do that. He looks sensible and sincere.”

“And I’m neither, am I?”

“Ask yourself. But this really is reckless.”

“We’re aware it’s reckless. But we have to do it all the same.”

“I see. You’re very brave.”

Dinelind was relatively proficient in Western Common Speech, but her mother tongue was definitely Elvish. She mostly talked to Menel and me.

“So, Dinelind, why were you there being attacked by a hydra?”

“Well, I don’t mind telling that story, if you have a little time to listen.”

“Let’s eat first,” Menel said. “Can’t ever trust an elf’s littles.”

He had a point. As long as we were in an area as dangerous as this, there was nothing to be lost by getting food in us whenever we were able. If our boat ever capsized, that would be the end of our food supply.

“Al, you got the smoked venison there, right?”

“I do, but... Would that be okay?”

“Yes, I can eat venison just fine.”

Given Al’s doubt, apparently elves really did have a strong image as vegetarians.

“About the only elves who don’t eat meat are those who underwent special training and became strongly fae in nature.” She explained that all other elves hunted like normal and ate meat and fish. “It’s the duty of us elves as rulers of the forest to hunt and fish to preserve the balance of nature.”

The idea of applying moderate pressure to maintain ecological balance was a very elf-like way of thinking.

On the boat, we ate the venison we’d smoked in the city of the dead along with some holy bread. We couldn’t very well use fire, so we had to have it cold, but the smoky taste of the cold venison made it a pretty tasty meal in its own way. Dinelind ate the bread like it was a new experience for her, and the venison with salt sprinkled over it made her eyes go wide.

“Wait.” Menel frowned upon seeing her reaction to the food. “What do you guys normally eat?”

Dinelind shrugged sarcastically. “You can imagine, can’t you?”

The marshland and cloudy river had a thick aura of impurity and death. The creatures we’d seen so far were snakes and stuff like that. It wasn’t as if I

couldn't imagine it; I just didn't really want to.

"And I think you have a good idea of why I was there, too. That's why you suggested we eat first and shared your food with me."

Menel grumbled and shut his mouth. Judging by his reaction, she had hit the bull's-eye.

Dinelind spoke in a detached tone. "As you guessed, there were too many mouths to feed."

Menel frowned even harder.



Too many mouths to feed... I wondered what that meant.

"Was there something wrong with you?"

Whenever I heard of people being abandoned when there were too many mouths to feed, those who couldn't work were usually first to go. The practice helped a group to strike the balance between food supply and food consumption, ensuring its survival. In both my past world's history and the world I was living in now, in the event of a famine, the old and infirm would be first to go, and their loss would enable the healthy and the work animals to survive. Dinelind looked a little peaky, but otherwise she seemed in good shape.

"No," she answered.

"Huh?"

"Will, that isn't the way elves think," Menel said, wrinkling his brows.

Dinelind nodded. "Yes, exactly."

"Umm, I don't understand."

"There's nothing to understand. It's simple," Menel said, with a complicated expression. Then, he spoke with conviction. "Elves are *noble*. They *never forsake the weak*. No matter how bad things get, an elf will never abandon the old or the sick. From the looks of it, it must be a completely isolated village, surrounded by danger."

Around us, the stagnant river and marshland extended as far as we could see.

“I bet whenever there’s a food shortage, those who can move and fight volunteer to leave,” Menel continued. “Best case, they can find some way out, make their way to somewhere inhabited, and call for help. And even if they don’t, that’s one less mouth to feed. Right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Who would think of sending the weak out to fend for themselves? That’s ridiculous,” Dinelind said seriously.

The weak were to be protected, and the strong were to be first to make sacrifices. She spoke not with a tone of fanaticism or blind faith, but as though this was absolutely natural common sense.

“You really are an elf,” Menel muttered.

“Excuse me? Was that a compliment or an insult?”

“A compliment, dammit.” Menel avoided looking directly at her as though she were the sun.

Elves are proud and noble—that was a common refrain I’d heard from everyone. I was beginning to see why.

“Elves never change,” Ghelreis said quietly. The old scar on his face was warped by the corners of his mouth pulling up into a smile.

We talked for a little while about a few less consequential things, and then I brought up the topic once more. “Dinelind, would you mind showing us to your settlement? If you’ll teach us the way to the mountains, we’ll do what we can for you.”

“‘Dine’ will do.” She brushed her blonde hair back with her fingers—it was still untied from her run-in with the hydra—and did it back up to around neck length. “That’s more than I could have wished for,” she said, and nodded. “Thank you.”



We held a course through the wetland down a narrow branch of the river for a while. Around the time the sun started to set, the forest came into view.

But it wasn’t the kind of beautiful forest that Ghelreis had talked about. It had a strong aura of death, like a patient stricken with a terminal disease near the

end of his days. The branches of the trees were creepily discolored all over. From their weakly drooping branches hung leaves that were already brown and half-withered.

Following the current, we rowed the boat into the forest. Although the haze was very thin, I could feel toxicity in it, and all around, I could sense the bloodlust of viciously brutal lifeforms. Everyone frowned. Although we'd expected it, the forest was clearly not in a normal state.

From the tiller, Reystov muttered his mind. "This looks awful."

"Yes, that's because it is." Dine admitted it freely. "The forest is completely corrupted and shrinks every year as if it's necrotizing. The animals here are all crazed monsters. It's surrounded by mist and marshland, and we have no idea which way we'd have to go to contact any other groups large enough to matter. And to top it off, the mountain which is our only landmark is a den of demons and a dragon."

No sooner had she murmured the word "dragon" than its roar echoed once more from the west. Strange birds screeched and flew, and I thought I sensed the forest's monstrous animals cowering in fear.

"And what's worse, the dragon's been like that recently. Some of us even said this might be the end."

"This... doesn't look like just the effects of a Taboo Word."

"Yes. It's the foul-dragon's miasma."

"The foul-dragon?"

The dragon was in the mountains. How could it—

"The tunnels that the dwarves ran underground."

Al and Ghelreis grimaced when they heard that response.

"For good and bad, we elves of Lothdor and the dwarves of the Iron Country were neighbors. There were a lot of paths between us both above and below ground. So after the Iron Country fell, the miasma of the dragon lying in its ruins flowed through the tunnels to every part of the forest, and it continues to do so today."

“That’s...”

“Mm...”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mean to imply anything against you dwarves or anything like that. I was just explaining the facts of the current situation, that’s all.” Dine waved her hand candidly and continued. “The fairies’ boon is weakened around here, and the water, air, and food have all absorbed the poison. The longer we live, the more the poison builds up inside us. Many here are bedridden and unable to move at this point. The beauty of Lothdor is a thing of the distant past. We don’t intend to accept our destruction or lose our pride, but even so, right now, this place is a dead man walking.”

The boat continued forward. A few fences came into view, then houses. They were dirty, dingy, battered, chalk houses. A few elves shambled out to look at the unfamiliar boat.

“We never expected heroes to come from the outside to slay the foul-dragon. I feel like I’m dreaming.” Those words that Dine quietly uttered sounded full of all kinds of emotions.

How many people had died of illness already before we even arrived? How many had been driven by the shrinking forest and dwindling food supplies to go out in search of contact with the outside world on a journey from which they would never return? There must have been people who knew her among them. If explorers had found this place earlier, before the foul-dragon problem materialized, would there have been people that could have been saved?

As I entertained those foolish thoughts, Dine walked to the bow of the boat with graceful movements that made her seem almost weightless and spun on her heel to face us. “Welcome to Lothdor.” She had the palm of her right hand placed over her heart, one leg slightly pulled back, and her head bowed. It was an old style of greeting. “We extend our warmest welcome to you, heroes.” Her expression blossomed into a broad smile.



For the next while, things became very busy.

Deciding that Dine had explained the situation well enough now, I requested

to be allowed to heal the gravely ill. The leaders of this elven settlement seemed to be unsure whether it was a good idea to expose the most vulnerable among them to strangers who had arrived out of nowhere. I bowed my head earnestly and pleaded to be allowed to heal them.

One of the elder elves with pure-white hair and an old scar noticed our weapons and armor. Through a bout of terrible coughing, he said, "If warriors with kit like this are pleading with us, we should not force them to shame themselves."

"Let me cure your cough," I said.

"Wait." He coughed again. "There are those who need it far more than I—"

"I'll cure you all." It was only a matter of who would come first. I intended to cure every elf I laid eyes on.

"Don't be ridiculous. Healing through benediction is a considerable drain on your concentration and vitality. You can't heal person after—"

"One or two hundred won't be a problem."

"Hundred?!" All the elves who were assembled here, including Dine, stared their eyes out at me.

"I can heal you all, and I will." I prayed as I spoke. I lowered my eyes slightly, concentrated intently, and asked for the assistance of the god of the flame. The next moment, a dim light glowed, and the elder's cough was gone. It was over in a few seconds. There was a small commotion among some of the elves; others were speechless.

I could attain a state of deep prayer in the span of a single breath. I'd reached that level naturally through being taught by Mary and praying every day. Merely being blessed with the power of miracles wouldn't be enough to allow a priest to survive in the thick of battle if they hadn't mastered this through training.

"Please gather everyone with serious symptoms. Those who can't be brought here, I will go to visit one by one." I looked around at everyone. "Don't worry," I said, and placed my hand over my heart. "I'll heal you all, on the flame of Gracefeel."

The elves nodded at each other, quickly splitting the task among them. Then they all rushed off to separate parts of the settlement.

By the time I was fully done healing everyone in the community, the sun had long since set. I stood by the river of foul water at the outskirts of the village and exhaled deeply. I could hear the sound of music coming faintly from the village.

Even those in critical condition, debilitated on their death beds with paralyzed limbs, had gotten up one after another. They cried tears of joy when their arms and legs started to work again, and hugged people with no regard for whether they were friends, acquaintances, or strangers.

Everyone was cheering, and from there it was only natural for food and drinks and instruments to be brought out. Soon, a party started. Everyone was all over me as the guest of honor, and I was forced to drink cup after cup of fruit wine. The elves were very interested in talking to Ghelreis and Al. Even Reystov quietly joined in on the drinking. As for Menel, he was dragged around by Dine, who was completely drunk, and they danced in front of the campfire. Whatever kind of dance that had been, he hadn't looked used to it.

It was a pleasant night, with the moon visible only hazily in the cloudy sky.

I would have liked to stay a little tipsy, but I used the Prayer of Detoxification to remove the alcohol from my bloodstream. I had no idea when a battle could occur. I couldn't yet afford to abandon myself to liquor.

Suddenly, I heard the flapping of wings. A large raven alighted on a twisted branch next to me. It had glossy black feathers and red eyes that had something ominous about them.

"Is your journey progressing smoothly?"

It was the Herald-raven of the god of undeath, Stagnate.

"Yes, so far at least... owowow."

A warning from the god of the flame rang like a headache through my head.

I'm sorry, but please calm down, God, it's okay.

"Hahaha. Gracefeel really does love you."

The raven clicked its beak in laughter. Then it paused for a beat, tilted its head, and said,

“Would you like to try being loved by me as well?”

“Very funny. So? Get to the point.” I stared into its red eyes.

“It’s nothing, really. Just a warning. If you are to turn back, this is likely your final opportunity.”

At the same time, the ground shook. I heard a rumbling that seemed to reverberate from the bowels of the earth.

rrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR...

I could hear roaring from the mountain range to the west. It was a terrifying sound that seemed to grip my soul within clenched talons. As the roaring came to an end, silence fell. Even the merry musical tunes of the elven village stopped dead as though petrified by the noise.

“I will say it one more time. If you challenge him, you will die.”

His red eyes were piercing.



“If you take on the dragon, you will die, with no way to escape.”

The god of undeath spoke flatly.

“Build up your strength.”

“If I do that, Al and the others will die, I expect. If the dragon is to harm anyone, the dwarves believe that their blood should be first to be spilled.”



“Indeed, the dwarves will die. Humans, elves, and dwarves alike will die in the hundreds, even thousands, when the foul-dragon awakens. But as a result of the casualties, faith will collect around you and Gracefeel.”

The gods’ power depended upon faith. Each time the damage caused by the foul-dragon increased, belief would gather around my god as people turned to her for help to get rid of the dragon. The power that my god gained from people’s wishes and prayers would feed directly into my own battle strength, provided that Gracefeel blessed me with it, and it would certainly be power enough for slaying a dragon.

“If the dragon causes great harm, skilled warriors and other ambitious, talented people will gather from all over hoping to gain fame by slaying it. As will disciples of the good gods charged with a mission. If you band those heroes together under the protection of Gracefeel returned to full strength, you will be able to make your blade reach the foul-dragon’s throat.”

Once again, I was reminded how convincing his words were.

“I am not fond of a plan like this, either. But you *should* allow there to be victims. It would be a courageous course of action, not a cowardly one.”

It was a convincing and sound argument. However—

“I can’t do that.”

“Why? Do you wish to save *everything* that badly?”

The Herald-raven shifted on the branch, irritated.

“I’ll grant you this: If you continue onward without forsaking a single thing, there may remain the slightest of possibilities that you could save everything you desire to save. But if you fail, the lives lost will not be a matter of ten or twenty thousand. And it will be a while before there is another hero who compares to you. For the sake of protecting some thousands of lives, you would put ten or even a hundred times that number at risk, even knowing what I’ve told you? It is the height of recklessness.”

“Stagnate, god of undeath, I’m sure you’re right.”

I did think he was. I could find no fault with his logic. If I was looking for the

optimal solution, that was probably it.

“If you agree, then—”

“But the moment I do that, the oath and devotion I depend upon will be broken.”

The god of undeath’s eyes grew wide.

Yes—that was the one problem.

“And you’re deliberately talking about ‘the right decision’ because you know that.”

“...”

It was to break my resolve and incorporate me into his forces. As though this were some pagan ritual in which power was gained by sacrificing people at an altar, he was recommending that the best path was to give up, to let it happen, to gain power in exchange for blood and flesh.

“Am I wrong?”

“...”

The god of undeath’s answer was silence.

“Stagnate, god of undeath.”

“Yes?”

“I am a weak person. I know myself to be just an ordinary human with a fickle heart, easily swayed and broken and quick to give up.”

I had no intention of saying that being reborn had changed me. The fundamental nature of my heart, my soul, probably hadn’t changed from my previous world. So if I let something happen, if I gave up on it, that would be the moment when I would break. I understood how that descent worked, and it started with making excuses that there was nothing I could do, that I had no opportunities, that it was impossible to continue—accumulating reasons to give up, and repeating those same excuses to myself over and over.

“But despite that, my god taught me that it was okay to start over. She allowed me to stand up and walk on my own two feet once more.” While

staring into the god of undeath's red eyes, I spoke of my feelings toward the god of the flame. "I was able to meet my precious family. I made treasured friends and allies. I have things I'm meant to do and things I want to do. She gave me the opportunity to reach out my hand once more for the things I'd lost, the things I'd given up on."

I had no idea how I could ever thank her enough. That reticent god wearing a hood had given me many truly precious things. And that was why.

"I will see that through. I will keep to my oath, keep faith in my heart, and until the very instant I fall over dead, I will be her hands and her blade."

Maybe it wasn't optimal, maybe it was twisted and ugly, but it was my belief that it was the only way for me. It was the only road before me, lit by the light of her flame.

"On the flame of Gracefeel."

"..."

The god of undeath still remained silent. Saying nothing, he looked at me... and sighed deeply.

"Dear, dear. Another attempt failed."



The distant sound of music could once again be heard from the elven village. Although they had stopped for a time because of the roaring of the dragon, they seemed to have gotten over it and started playing again. The crystal-clear, jaunty tones of a harp echoed pleasantly around the forest.

"You are correct. I realized it from the moment I first met you. Your soul is not particularly strong. If you give up, you will break and begin your descent. Your soul is nothing more than that, and I was well aware of it."

I remembered the despair of our first meeting. Then the reason he'd pressed me so hard must have been because he had seen right through me.

"It never occurred to me that you could become a hero. I thought of you as an extra to the Three Heroes, a brittle soul, notably skilled due to training, but nothing more."

In actual fact, that was what I was. If not for Mary's scolding, if not for the grace of God, I would have folded in the face of the god of undeath and met my ruin.

"But you overturned all my expectations. You did not give in. You did not fold. In fact, you stood up, challenged me, and even defeated me."

The god of undeath's Herald-raven laughed cheerfully.

"Paradoxically, that is what will make you capable of becoming a hero, feeble soul."

"I never thought about 'becoming a hero.'"

"Hahaha. Knowing the extent of your own weakness and *because of it* refusing to give up, refusing to fold, being willing to die for what you believe in... "

As the elven music played in the distance, the god of undeath strung his words smoothly together with the melody.

"That *is* what people call a hero, William G. Maryblood, inheritor of all that defined the trio I once desired."

I didn't know how to reply to that. I only knew that for some reason, I felt strangely calm. I was talking to the evil god who had once thrown me into despair. He was my enemy, and I had risen up to oppose him and put my life on the line to fight him. And yet, my heart was as tranquil as it was when I prayed.

"Despite knowing it is in vain, I must say this once regardless. *Join me. A seat on my right shall be prepared for you. You shall have eternal protection and armies of undead. We will kill the dragon, defeat heroes, bring down all the other gods and conquer the world. You and I together.*"

I probably felt so calm because I knew that the deity called Stagnate, with his ideals, schemes, mercy, and everything else that made him, was truly a being to be respected. But for that very reason, I placed my hand over my heart and, with the utmost respect—

"Thank you, Stagnate, god of undeath. But no."

I turned him down.

“In vain, as I thought, then.”

The raven laughed as if he had known it all along.

“Yes.” I nodded. “After all, you *don’t want to see the fall of a hero*, do you?” The instant I said that, the Herald-raven froze. For some strange reason, I had remembered all kinds of things. “If I lost my devotion to Gracefeel and became yours, I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to remain the kind of being you’re looking for.”

“...”

Stagnate had told me once that he wanted to create an eternally kind world. That he couldn’t bear to look at a soul that had been dragged down and lost its radiance among regret and suffering.

“Stagnate, god of undeath. You are my respected enemy, and a great deity.” I thought so from the bottom of my heart. “So I will not bow to your temptations. I will carry on being your enemy. Because I respect you.”

I may not be able to sympathize with you; we may have been enemies since we first met; but I know that you are great. I know that you are merciful in your own way. And so I want to pay you the greatest respect, by not becoming yours and continuing to be your enemy.

“What can I say?”

The god of undeath remained silent for a while and then spoke slowly, in a low tone.

“This is the first time that a human child has seen through me so completely. Despite how straightforward you appear, you are surprisingly sharp. You have understood the divine will of a god; you could rightly call yourself a wise man.”

“I’m honored,” I said, unsure how to reply to his frank words of praise.

“But what a shame it is. You will die. Die torn apart by a dragon.”

The god of undeath’s Herald-raven laughed bitterly.

“If you ever change your mind, feel free to call me any time, won’t you, hmm? I shall make you a high-level undead in the blink of an eye. Any time is

acceptable, even the instant of your death or after your head goes flying. Oh, if you call me after your head has gone flying, would you settle for being a Dullahan Lord? Or would a No Life King be more to your taste?"

The god of undeath sounded as if he was enjoying himself. I shrugged. "I'm going against a dragon. If I lose, there won't be a trace of me left."

"Hahaha. How right you are!"

We both laughed.

"Then I shall take my leave. Gracefeel must be getting quite ticked."

Although the warning revelation had certainly stopped ringing inside my head, I could somehow sense that her stress levels were building. Gracefeel was very godlike most of the time, but on matters concerning the god of undeath, I got the feeling that she seemed childish, maybe even human.

"Farewell, then, paladin of the flame, my wise and foolish foe!"

Leaving those words behind, the Herald-raven flew off and was quickly obscured by the darkness of night. As I watched it go, I was careless enough to allow a hint of a smile to creep onto my face.

"Owww!" The concept of a sharp, pinching sort of pain was sent into my head. I winced.

Th-That was mean, God!



The following morning after my unexpected chance encounter and dialog with the god of undeath, the post-party elven settlement was filled with the sounds of an argument.

Having made quite a lot of use of benediction the previous night in addition to my conversation with the god of undeath, I was just a little mentally fatigued. Rubbing my eyes, I wandered out of the hut that had been provided for me and looked to see what was going on.

"Look, just let me go, goddammit!"

"You can't seriously expect us to just let you go and do that!"

It was Menel and Dine who were arguing. My dozy brain considered this for a few seconds. “Oh, it’s just a lovers’ quarrel,” I concluded, and had just about started to head back into the hut to get some more sleep when I was gripped firmly on both of my shoulders.

“Hold it, you.”

“Would you care to repeat that?”

Their voices sounded pretty threatening. This was finally enough to wake me up completely, and at the same time, make me break out in a cold sweat. I laughed nervously in the hope it would get me out of this. *Tell me, God, what’s the right answer to that question?*

Dine sighed. “It’s not exactly the time to abandon ourselves to romance.”

She had a point. This was a time of life and death for their village. Whichever way you sliced it, there were clearly matters that took precedence.

“Ya.” Menel nodded in agreement and shrugged. “If only it was, huh? Too bad.”

I didn’t miss Dine’s shoulders twitch and her composure falter. I couldn’t help seizing at the topic. “So if circumstances were different, you would have been saying something to her?”

“Hm? Well sure, she’s pretty, right?”

Dine knit her beautiful brow. She turned her cheek away from Menel and was about to say something back when he continued.

“Probably would’ve tossed her some flattering bullshit in place of a greeting, sure.”

Dine froze. And then she started trembling.

Menel...

“I don’t get you...”

“Ya, well, you’re so unused to women it actually makes me worried for you.”

There was a pretty big gap between Menel and me when it came to where we each stood in the world of chatting up women. It was probably on the same

level as a Japanese person in my previous world compared to an Italian. Though that said, Menel could be pretty dense at times as well.

“With Ithil elves, once you’re able to recite a single love poem in front of a woman, that makes you an adult.”

“That’s why you Ithils are always called irresponsible!” Dine glared at Menel sharply with her violet eyes.

Menel shrugged casually. “Well, Remmirath folk are apparently a bunch of headstrong shrews.”

“Oh, you went there!”

Before I knew it, the argument had started up again. They both had tongues as sharp as swords, and as the verbal spar unfolded between them, the Elvish got faster and faster, and I could no longer pick the words out. When it came to these kinds of arguments, elves made heavy use of sarcasm and metaphor, which made it even harder to grasp.

But Dine kind of looked like she was having fun.

I suddenly thought back on the heavy expressions of the elves when we first arrived at the settlement. They’d lost many talented warriors and elementalists in the war-torn era of the Great Collapse and were cut off from civilization. Their forest was violated by curses and poisons, became isolated and diseased, and fell into decline. And two hundred years went by, during which not a single one of the brave elves who journeyed out in search of contact with the outside world ever returned...

Those years must have been so difficult that silly arguments like this went right out of everyone’s mind.

“You really are a ■■■■■■!”

“And you’re a feckin’ ■■■■■■■■.”

That one left her open-mouthed.

I wondered what those insults meant. If even the great Gus had no memory of learning them, I figured they had to be pretty bad.



After their argument had calmed down, I intervened and brought the conversation back on topic.

“So what was that about going somewhere?”

“The Lord of the Woods,” Menel said, clearly still in a bad mood. “The Lord of the Woods around here. I should be able to heal it a little.”

That was a good point. I had my hands full with healing yesterday, but I’d been thinking about discussing this with him when we got up. I figured Menel would be able to improve the situation in this forest a bit. However—

“We can’t possibly let you.” Dine’s response was curt. “No way.”

“For God’s sake...” Menel frowned, but Dine had her arms folded in a pose that indicated she wasn’t going to budge an inch.

The Lord of the Woods was the forest’s core, the being that was its greatest weak point. If something with power and malice came into contact with it, terrible damage could be done. We’d seen that just recently when Beast Woods had begun to be contaminated by that Cernunnos. Even if they were somewhat indebted to us, the elves who lived in this forest probably wouldn’t allow outsiders in so easily.

“Umm, but, Menel can be trusted. I swear it. If you need some kind of guarantee, you could take me hostage or...”

Dine shook her head, as if to say I’d gotten it all wrong. “It’s not that. We do trust you all.”

“Huh?”

“We trust you and we’re thankful to you. I don’t know how many people you must have saved just last night. If there’s something you seek, we want to do whatever we can to satisfy your request. If you ask us to provide you with military strength, we’ll give you warriors, and if you need to be shown the way, we’ll gladly guide you.”

“Then why?”

“If we could show you safely to the Lord of the Woods on your request, then there would be no problem.” Dine looked down. “The area around the Lord of

the Woods is beast territory now. It's no longer ours. We *can't* guide you."

"But that's even more reason—"

"Even more reason for us to depend on you?" Dine tilted her head and smiled. "You saved our lives and gave us back hope. And you're just about to head into battle. How could we possibly push *another* battle onto you, completely inconsiderate of your circumstances? 'Oh, please, heroes, we're in such trouble and we can't handle it on our own, please drop everything you're doing to help us, we beg you!'"

She shrugged. "I'm sorry, but no. As if we could make such a shameless request. This isn't about asking others for help, it's about clinging like a leech to people to whom we're already indebted and placing further burden on them."

Lost for a response, I unconsciously looked to Menel for help. *Umm, what is she... just... what?*

With an incredibly complicated expression, Menel said simply, "See? Elf."

I could only nod. They were incredibly noble and an incredible pain to deal with. I could understand what everyone had said about them.

This nature of theirs might have arisen from the way they lived such long lives in perpetual youth. As a result of hardly aging, there weren't many children or elderly in the settlement who needed protecting. Most of them were physically young. That was what enabled them to make these choices. Humans who grow old in no time at all couldn't hope to imitate them.

"That's how it is, so thank you, but there's no need for you to needlessly use your power to help us."

As I was thinking about what I should do about this, Ghelreis lumbered over. Because it was dawn right now, his hard expression, made sterner by the scar running down from his forehead, looked drowsy. His eyelids were still half-closed. "What is it?" he asked.

"Well, you see..." I explained the situation to him.

A deep expression spread across his face. "Truly, elves never change."

"What do you think we should do?"

Ghelreis hummed and nodded. “Just do it, I say.”

Well said, I thought. It was clear that he was a veteran. “Alright, let’s just do it, then. Menel, can you tell where the Lord of the Woods is located?”

“It’s weak, but I can just about pick it up, sure.”

“Ghelreis, please gather Al and Reystov. Full gear.”

“Mm.”

“Once we’re all here, we’ll eat breakfast and go.”

Dine looked between us all, flustered. “W-Wait, what? Wait a minute. You’re talking as though you’re going on a stroll to walk off your breakfast. Where are you going?”

“Well, beast hunting.”

“B-But we don’t...”

“Who said we can’t help unless we’re asked? We’re sticking our noses in whether you like it or not,” Menel said lightly. “And more to the point”—he poked my arm—“there’s no way regular old beasts are going to wear us two down at this point.”

It really wasn’t much different from an after-meal stroll, and it would inconvenience me more to have to abandon them. I had sworn an oath to my god that as her hands, I would bring salvation to those in sorrow. In this world where gods existed, a very strong oath was a serious thing to make. It was even close to a *geas*, a type of vow from Irish mythology in my previous world. It was easy to imagine that breaking one intentionally wouldn’t bring about good results, and more importantly, if we came back here to find this settlement destroyed, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.

Ghelreis was right. It would be best for us to take it upon ourselves to interfere and help for our own reasons.

“So,” Menel said, “what do proud and noble elves do when the people who helped them go wandering into dangerous territory all by themselves?”

Dine groaned in frustration. “Oh... boo!” It wouldn’t make sense for them to stop us, and they would find it physically impossible to do so in the first place.

“Wait there a minute. I’ll go and call some skilled people who can get moving right away. Don’t you dare go on your own! Understand?!” Dine went running off.

Menel, Ghelreis, and I looked at each other and laughed out loud.



All across the land, forests home to elves were held to be inviolable territory. I could give all kinds of reasons, but the simplest and most powerful one was that most elves who kept guard over a forest were excellent hunter-warriors or elementalists. Opposing the race of elves within a forest meant a brutal death. Specifically, you would be chased around like a hunter’s prey, unable to get any real sleep, and after being toyed with by the fairies, you would become food for the animals. Therefore, elven forests were off-limits, sacred territory feared and respected by all races.

The elven settlement in Lothdor, however, didn’t have very many strong warriors or elementalists. This made sense; the main hunter-warriors and elementalists among them had apparently died in battle, boldly fighting the demons during the collapse of the Union Age. In elven society, that was a severe loss, because elves typically lived long lives and didn’t bear many children.

Things got even worse after that, when the forest was cursed by a Taboo Word and the fall of the Iron Country left it isolated. Due to the roaming monsters and the poison, even food was difficult to come by and the fairies’ power was weakened. There was no way they could raise any new warriors or elementalists under those circumstances. And from what I heard, the few talented elves who survived the Great Collapse attempted contact with the outside, only to fail and never return.

Now that I thought about it, some of the corpses in that murky river were only partially rotten. If those remains had been two hundred years old, they would surely have all been bones by now... which could only mean one thing.

Furthermore, due to the fall of the Iron Country, the supply of weapons had dried up, so metal products seemed to be very precious. There were even people using stone arrowheads or spears with stone blades, as if it were the

Stone Age.

I could see that if beasts had claimed the Lord of the Woods' domain in circumstances like this, there was no way that the elves could reclaim it very easily. In fact, I thought it was impressive enough that despite being put in such a stressful situation, they had still managed to keep things under control and continue sending people out without giving up on contacting the outside. It felt as though they had already stepped some distance over the line where a human settlement would have long since collapsed.

"So, the beasts that have taken over the domain are bug-type beasts... devil-bugs, I think they're called..." We were walking through a forest of dead trees under a cloudy sky. Dine had accompanied us in the end, joined by four elven hunters. "The defensive strength of the giant earwigs with their hard shells is hard to deal with..."

"Ah! These, right?! I'll do my best!"

"Mm. This will be good training, young master."

Al smashed them with his Immense halberd as they appeared. The ones he missed were crushed by Ghelreis's Sword-smasher mace.

"Then there are the purple poison moths that come down from the sky..."

"Right." Telperion's silver string sang a high-pitched, beautiful note in Menel's hand as it was pulled back and then released. The approaching poison moth was shot perfectly through its weakest point and fell to earth.

"Ah, watch out, poison scales..."

"Sure, sure."

Without even an incantation from Menel, the wind scattered the scales according to his will.

They were hardly having any difficulty. As the three of them cleared away the giant bugs, Dine stood there dumbfounded. The other elves were equally surprised. But there was nothing particularly surprising about it. This threat wasn't significant enough to destroy an already seriously weakened elven village. These three hadn't trained themselves so weakly that this would give

them a hard time.

“There’s nothing for us to do, is there?” I said, smiling wryly.

“Standing by’s important,” Reystov admonished me.

He was right; the reason Al, Menel, and Ghelreis could focus on what was in front of them and go all out was because we were standing on alert behind them. This was an important role in itself. But ultimately, I remained in that role all the way into the domain, where we were confronted with the sight of so many cocoons and larvae that it almost got a “blergh” out of me.

Menel cleared it up. He poured some strength back into the Lord of the Woods. The noxious air began to clear. Power returned to the forest. The elves cheered. And still I hadn’t gotten anything at all to do.

It made me feel kind of... itchy.

“Maybe I should have gotten in on the action...”

“You know, for how calm you look, you can be real bloodthirsty sometimes.”

I looked away.



The large trees, which had been covered in revolting bugs and started to die, regained a little of their vitality. The elves were openly displaying their joy, but gradually their beaming expressions began to fade, and before I realized it, looks of shame had taken their place.

“William, are you sure this was okay?” Dine asked the question that seemed to be on all of their minds.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“If the dragon or the demons notice you because you’ve done this...”

“We’ll be in big trouble.” I nodded. That would definitely be bad. We were already at the western foot of the mountain range. Now that we had drawn so close, it would be difficult for them to immediately move all their forces positioned on the east side over to the west, but even so, what we had done was still risky.

“Then you—”

“However—” I put a hand up and stopped Dine as she tried to argue further. “Abandoning this village at this stage would be even more unthinkable. Who knows how many of you could die by the time we get back.”

Poison, monsters, food, resources—the factors that could lead to someone dying in this place were too numerous to list. Furthermore, it was possible that we wouldn’t be able to return at all. As long as we were going to be fighting, we intended to win, but only a fool wouldn’t give any consideration to what might happen should he lose.

“So this is fine.”

Just as I’d declared to the god of undeath, I had no intention of abandoning anyone in order to win. I’d made an oath to that effect, and I intended to keep it. And that was why my god was providing me with such extraordinary protection. It was far too late to contemplate breaking that oath.

“Are you sure?”

“I swear on the flame of the goddess, I don’t regret it.”

That’s right. I didn’t regret it. Judging by the prickling feeling on the back of my neck, things probably hadn’t turned out very well, but I was prepared for that, and I had been ever since the day I chose this way of living. Only...

“Al, Reystov, and Ghelreis... I’m sorry for getting you involved in my personal business.”

Menel aside, this hadn’t had much to do with the other three. I bowed my head to them, thinking that they might not have a very good opinion of me.

“I knew you would do this, so please don’t let it play on your mind, sir,” Al said. “Without you, Sir Will, I wouldn’t even have reached this place to begin with. I’d probably have died on the way.” He smiled.

“The young master is quite correct.” Ghelreis nodded slowly with his usual stern face.

“Yeah,” said Reystov. “Nothing new there. Anyway, if I know you, you’re planning on going right now. I packed already.”

Reystov understood my pattern of behavior. I was grateful for that.

“What? Right... now?”

“Yes. Can you show us the way to the nearest underground path? Oh, we’ll be abandoning the boat, so please do what you want with the cargo and food we can’t carry with us. We’ve also left a simple map.”

If I’d just said, “You can have these,” there was a chance that the elves wouldn’t accept them, so I was going to leave it all behind to give them no choice. If one of the elves used our boat to go upstream, return to the lake, and head towards the city by the lakeside, Gus would probably attend to the rest as he saw fit. My grandpa was proficient in Elvish and also knew that our city was located downriver.

Dine still hadn’t replied.

“If we’ve been noticed by the enemy, speed will be of the essence,” I prompted. “So please make it quick.”

“Alright.” Dine nodded and looked around at the other elves behind her as if to check something with them. Then she turned back to us. “I’ll send one of us back to the village to inform everyone. So please, take us with you. We should at least be good as decoys or shields.”

They all wore the same expression of steadfast resolve. Menel opened his mouth to reply, but I forestalled him. “We don’t want you,” I said, dismissing their resolve out of hand. “You’re too weak.”

I thought I heard them quietly gasp. Though I’d called them “recovered,” that only meant that I’d removed the toxins and miasma inside their bodies. The physical strength lost by being poisoned for so long couldn’t be recovered by benediction. Even these, the finest fighters among them, didn’t look well in the face.

“We can’t afford dead weight.” I was firm about it.

Dine scrunched up her face. “You’ve done so much for us, and you want us simply to show you the way into a death trap?”

“Yes.”

“This is so humiliating,” Dine muttered, furrowing her brow and looking as though she had just taken a bite of something terribly bitter. “But... alright... fine. We’ll abide by your decision.”

The elves behind her began to protest.

“But Dinelind...”

“Don’t you think this is rather...”

But Dine turned back to them and said, “Surely you don’t think we should turn our eyes from our own powerlessness and compound our shame?” Those words silenced them. “Right now, we can’t do anything to change the fact that we’re weaklings in poor health. We’re weaklings...” It sounded as though she was trying to convince herself.

“It’s this way,” she said, and started walking. “Follow me.”

I got a slight glimpse of her violet eyes. She was fighting back tears of frustration.

Menel whispered to me. “Hey, Will... you know I could’ve...”

“No. I was the right one to say it.” Menel had probably been intending to take that unenviable job and make himself the bad guy, but I thought that would probably be far too cruel.



It was a set of strange metal doors fitted into an enormous stone arch. A mixture of dwarven construction and elven ornamentation, the doors had countless Signs engraved upon them in an ancient style of writing. Toxic miasma seeped out of small gaps around their edges.

“The West Gate... I never thought the day would come when I would come here again,” Ghelreis murmured with feeling.

“So this is the entrance to the Iron Country...” Al gazed at the doors and spent a while in silence with his lips drawn together. No one said anything for a while. Ghelreis hadn’t been back home in two hundred years, and for Al, this was the first time.

“You’re really going through here?”

“Yes.” I placed poison-resistance magic and blessings on each of us. Menel added to that by summoning some assistance from the elementals of air, gathering clean and fresh air into our surroundings. Reystov cast his eyes around cautiously, while Ghelreis and Al gave their undivided attention to a final inspection of their gear.

As they worked, I gave the doors a look-over. They had a large door knocker made of metal that was fashioned after a flower. Several large Signs that were engraved near it were now quite worn away. I read them carefully.

“Pulsate et aperietur vobis.”

On a closer look, the doors were made of an evil-warding metal that no one knew how to smelt any longer, and not only that, multiple blessings had also been placed upon them. They were the kind of doors that would inflict serious damage upon the minions of the evil gods if they so much as carelessly approached them, let alone knocked. They were doors made with the advanced technology of the Union Age, which were impossible to recreate with the world’s current level of technology.

“Al, knock,” I said to my gentle, black-haired friend. “That’s the sign.”

“Sir Will, umm, you want me to be the one to do it?”

“Who better?” He was the true successor to the lost Iron Country; there could be no one with the right to open these doors other than him. “This job *should* be yours.”

“Okay...” Al went quiet as if hesitating for a while. Eventually, he pushed his lips into a thin line, and made his way towards the doors. He was tall for a dwarf, but standing next to the enormous doors, he looked very small. He took a single deep breath, took hold of the door knocker, and with a serious manner, he struck the doors twice, producing two deep, resonant sounds.

The Words engraved upon the doors shone, and the structure enclosing the doors rumbled. Slowly, weightily, as though welcoming us in with both arms spread wide, the huge doors opened—

That instant, a powerful chill ran down my spine. My entire body stiffened, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. A single image was thrust

into my mind.

A gold reptilian eye staring at us.

Pierced by its glare, I felt my heart tighten as though it were being slowly squeezed. My legs trembled. I felt like I was going to fall to my knees. My breathing grew ragged and heavy. Instinct grabbed reason's collar with all its strength and screamed madly into its face: *Run. Run, run, run! Abandon everything and run right now! You can't win!*

Then I noticed the others. They were on their knees, clutching their chests. It looked as though several of the elves had already passed out. The golden eye in my mind narrowed as its stare grew more murderous. The pressure increased further. My mind was scrambled by worry and fear. My knees started to buckle.

I clenched my teeth. Tensing up all the muscles in my body, I opened my eyes wide and dug both my feet into the ground. I calmed the stormy sea inside my heart and forced my ragged breathing under control.

"Fortia!!"

I shouted out the Word that meant bravery and strength. At the same time as the influence of the Word spread like a wave through the space surrounding me, there was a sudden release of pressure inside my head, and the image of the golden eye vanished without a trace. I breathed heavily. It was gone. I could sense nothing.

But I knew he was grinning.



"So we were noticed..."

This wasn't the work of demons. Even a demon with the rank of Commander, no, even a King probably couldn't perform a feat like that. I hadn't felt such a sense of despair and pressure since the god of undeath's Echo. And it had taken no more than a look. Without a doubt, this was the work of the dragon. It was the foul-dragon from the age of the gods, whose power even the gods recognized and whom Stagnate had predicted would be my death.

"Calamity's Sickle, the foul-dragon Valacirca..."

The demons aside, I'd never expected to be able to cheat my way to a victory against the dragon. I'd felt a prickling on the back of my neck immediately after we'd purified the Lord of the Woods, so I'd even had a vague awareness that we'd been detected. I'd known it—but I hadn't expected Valacirca to be this far off the scale.

Menel breathed very deeply and hit his own quivering legs over and over, cursing at them. Reystov was breathing slowly and steadily. His hand was gripped very, very tightly around the handle of his sword. Ghelreis and Al had just about managed to prevent themselves from collapsing by leaning against one of the doors.

When I turned around, I saw that all of the elves had passed out with the exception of Dine. Even she had sunk to the ground and was shaking heavily and weeping.

That malicious gaze from below the earth was so harmful on its own that "devastating" would be too tame a word. So this was a dragon, and this was what it meant to oppose a dragon. I'd been expecting it, but I couldn't help shivering at just how far removed from everything else it was. Demidragons and dragons were nothing alike. This dragon was probably even above the god of undeath's Echo in terms of power.

"You... You're going to fight... this?" Dine murmured in shock.

"Yes. That's why we came."

I looked up at the reddish-brown mountains to which we'd drawn so close. I thought of the peaceful scenery of Whitesails and Torch Port. I thought about the whiteness of the sails traveling back and forth on the river and sea, the cheery shanties, the bustle of people putting their all into their daily labor, the daily activity that ought to continue a long time into the future.

"To take back the mountains. To take back peace."

I gripped the handle of Pale Moon once again. The spear, which I'd grown quite accustomed to by now, fit snugly into my palm just as it had when I first laid hand on it. I incanted a single Word and lit up the blade.

Everyone had already regrouped without me saying anything. With their

weapons in hand, they had picked themselves up and were standing firm. It struck me how ready they looked. Those were the resolved expressions of warriors.

“So, we’ll be going,” I said.

“Don’t sweat it, we’ll make it back alive somehow.”

“Yeah. Just another job.”

“I’ll do my best...”

“Mm.”

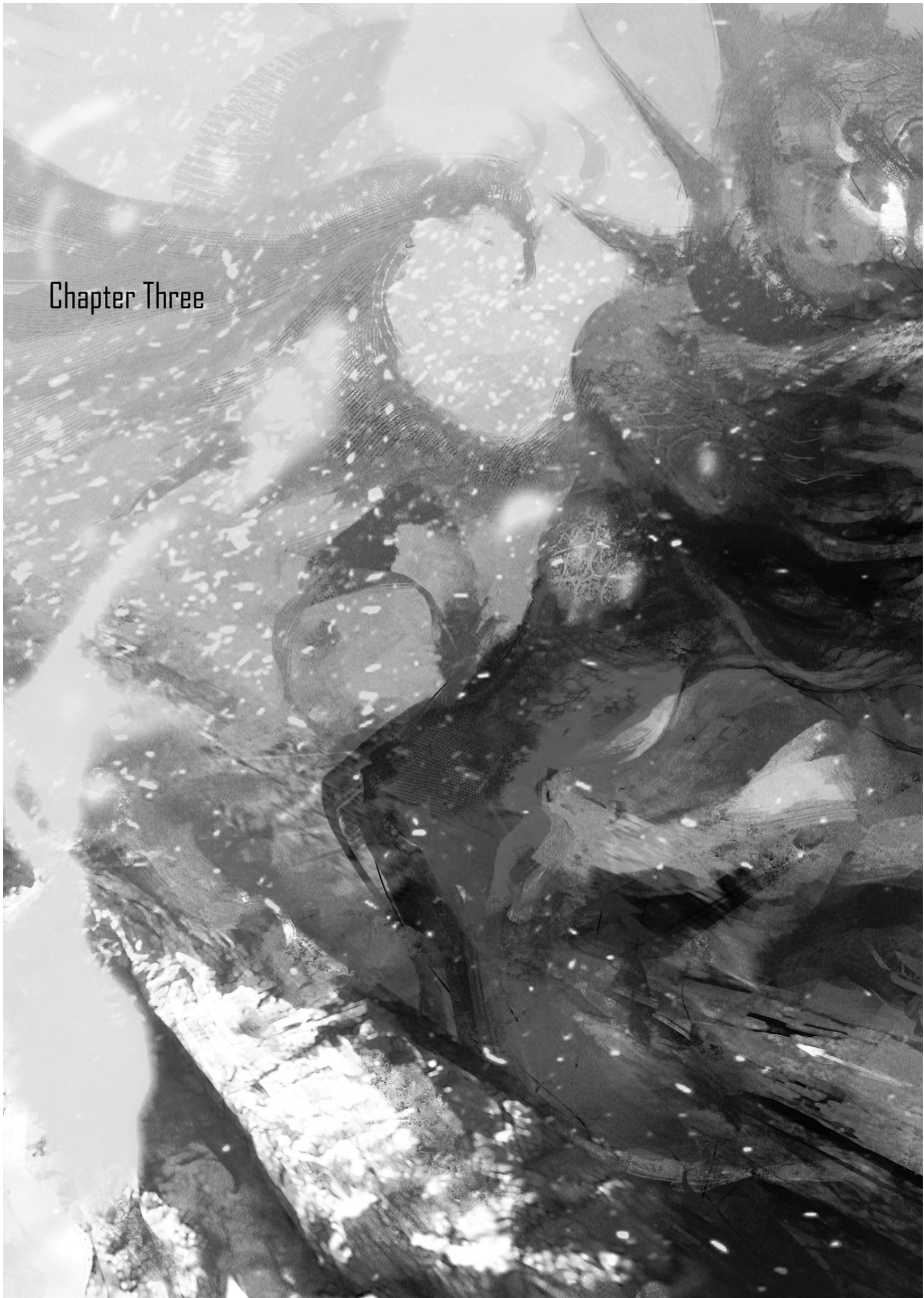
We all offered a parting remark, and headed for the open doors together. Beyond, the creepy entrance to a pitch-black tunnel awaited us like a gaping maw.

“Wait.” It was Dine’s voice. As I turned around, she shakily rose to her feet and looked directly at us. Her face was pale, but still she gracefully placed a palm over her heart. “We elves of Lothdor will not forget this debt. I swear here to our creator, Rhea Silvia. One day, we will repay your kindness.” She smiled, as though giving us her blessing. “May the protection of the good gods and the spirits of courage be with you wherever you go.”

All of us replied with a smile and a nod. And then we walked. Into the stone tunnels of the dwarves, the roots of the Rust Mountains, the ruins of the once-prosperous Iron Country, the downward slope of darkness—

We walked forward, never turning back.

Chapter Three



Beyond the West Gate lay stone walls and stone floors—endless stone passages that gave a rigid and cold impression. The passages were wide with high ceilings, probably because they had been important trade routes with the elven lands.

A lot of dust had piled up over the past two hundred years. It would have been normal for a place like this to have spider webs everywhere and be covered in droppings from bats and beasts, but there was no sign of anything like that. The reason was the foul-dragon's miasma filling the air with a black, mist-like smoke.

“Urgh.”

“I don't think any of us want to stay here long.”

Though I'd stacked anti-poison miracles and magic upon us, I could still sense something unpleasant. And because of the miasma filling the air, we didn't have a very clear view ahead of us, either.

“Enemy encounters and traps are the big worry,” Al said.

Ghelreis nodded. “Apart from the demon traps, I also cannot deny that there might still be some untriggered traps that were set by our fallen brothers.”

He was right. Since they'd been trying to repel a demon invasion, the dwarves of the Iron Country at the time must have prepared a large number of defenses. In a situation like this, it was possible to anticipate that we wouldn't be dealing with tame traps that set off alarms, but serious ones that could kill you instantly if you stepped on them.

“About light. Gonna be using fire?”

“Let's not. There's a chance that there are buildups of bad air.”

The best practice for a source of light was to prepare both a magical light and a regular flame and make it so that even if one went out, you still had the other. However, this used to be a mine, so I had some concerns that buildups of gas could ignite here. Deciding to hold back on the fire, I supplemented Pale Moon by converging mana into several pebbles with the Word of Light engraved upon them and handed them out. Menel threw them into lanterns with shutters,

making it so we could control the amount of light being produced. It was a trick that also considered the scout at the front of the party, who needed to work in low light.

“What order are we going in?” Menel asked.

“Menel, you lead us. Be on your guard for traps and demons. Ghelreis, you go behind him.”

I placed Menel, who had good ears and could detect traps, at the front. Next came Ghelreis. Like all dwarves, he could see in the dark and excelled at sensing things underground, and additionally, he had a good grasp of what the internal structure of the Iron Country was like at the time.

“Then Al and I will go in the middle. Reystov, you take the back, please.”

I placed Reystov the veteran at the end of the line and asked him to watch out for attacks from the rear. Because I could use magic and was the most powerful force in battle and Al had high physical offensive strength, I placed us right in the middle so we could quickly change places according to the situation.

“Our opponents are demons. There are some that crawl along walls and ceilings, and some have wings. Take care you aren’t surprised by an attack from an unexpected direction.” Everyone nodded.

As we got walking, I noticed Al constantly turning his head, so I added in a quiet voice, “Oh, I didn’t mean to stay alert in all directions at all times.”

“Really?”

“Yes. After all, that’s impossible.”

A person who has his guard up in all directions at all times only exists in the imagination. Humans can’t change the fact that they find it easier to detect things in front of them than behind them, and being constantly on your guard in enemy territory is exhausting. That’s why it’s meaningful to have a few people each look in different directions to cover for each other.

“Just keep it in the back of your mind. It’ll make it faster for us to reorganize ourselves.”

When you are actually attacked from an unexpected direction, whether or

not you were told that might happen translates to a difference in the speed of the reaction. When something they weren't expecting in the slightest happens to a person, they freeze up and stop thinking for an instant. It happens to everyone. I'd mentioned it just to be safe, but I'd forgotten that this kind of dangerous journey was a first for Al.

I re-explained in a way that was easier to understand. "Menel and Ghelreis are watching what's ahead and on the ground, and Reystov is keeping an eye out behind us, so we should focus on what's happening above and to the sides. The stuff about surprise attacks is just something to bear in mind. This will get pretty tiring, so we'll take little breaks from time to time and have someone stand on watch."

"Right!" Al nodded enthusiastically. He really was quick on the uptake, and his close-combat skills were improving rapidly as well. I was sure that he would get used to the tried-and-tested techniques of exploration just as quickly.

The straight path continued. We all pushed forward in silence.

Every so often, Menel would stick a palm out behind him to stop the rest of us, and spend a moment listening out or disarming a trap. Deterioration over the years had already rendered the bow guns in the walls harmless due to lack of tension, but the same couldn't be said for the pitfalls and spike balls. Menel discovered those kinds of dangerous traps effortlessly and neutralized them with a practiced hand by either disarming the mechanisms or marking the spots that would trigger them.

As Ghelreis watched him work, he said briefly, "The Rock Hall soon. After that, it branches terribly." Then, as an afterthought, he said, "This has been unexpected."

I nodded in agreement. "Yes. *There weren't any demon ambushes.*"

There hadn't even been one. We'd clearly been discovered by the dragon, yet there was no sign of any of them coming to intercept us.



"Does that, um, mean that the dragon and the demons aren't acting as one?"

"Can't be sure of that yet. Rock Hall's coming up. They're probably all waiting

there, right? Hoping to surround the enemy in a wide, open place and finish them off with a full-scale assault. Usual stuff.”

Drawing the enemy deep into your own territory to encircle and destroy them was certainly an effective technique.

“On the other hand, if there *isn’t* an ambush in the Rock Hall...”

“Yeah. Al’s right if so.”

Ghelreis had said that the path branched terribly after Rock Hall. Once we made our way into one of those branches, the demons wouldn’t be able to track us completely. There was no way that whoever was leading the demons would choose *not* to send his forces to intercept us at Rock Hall. If something like that happened, the only possible interpretation could be that the demon leader hadn’t noticed our intrusion in the first place. In other words, it would be the surest possible proof that Valacirca, almost certainly the owner of that murderous stare, hadn’t teamed up with the demons at all.

“Wait...” Menel held a palm out behind him and stopped everyone. He listened out for something at the other end of the gently curving passage.

“What?”

“Noise. Something metal jangling. And footsteps, back and forth.” He spoke in a hushed voice.

“Is there an ambush?”

“Can’t tell. Something’s there. That’s all I’m sure of.”

“Rock Hall is very close,” Ghelreis said.

“Um, so... doesn’t that mean... this is... um...”

A demon ambush was probably a safe assumption. We all nodded together and gripped our weapons.

“Ghelreis and I will go in with our shields up and test the waters.”

We took the large shields off our backs. If we covered each other with these shields which could cover the vast majority of our bodies, we would be able to endure their attacks even if they had us half-surrounded and fired on us all at

once the moment we left the passage. After seeing how much power they were packing, we could decide our course of action according to the situation. For instance, we could withdraw, barrage them with magic, or retreat slowly into the passage as we dealt with them.

“Menel, you provide support from the end of the passage. Al and Reystov, stand by. Use your judgment and attack when it looks right.” Keeping it short, I told everyone their roles. We reorganized our line, cut down the amount of light from our lanterns, silenced our footsteps as much as we could, and continued along the passage in deadly silence.

Stopping just before the Rock Hall, I made sure everyone could see my hand—the hand gripping my spear—and I raised one finger. Then I raised a second. And at the instant the third was raised, Ghelreis and I started charging forward, our shields held in front of us.

Once we entered the wide-open space, the miasma thinned.

It was a vast cylindrical space with a very high ceiling. A spiral staircase ran up the wall, similar to the inside of a screw hole, and at countless places along it I could see passages going off in different directions. And also—

“Ohhh!”

“Dwarves! Dwarves are here!”

“Humans, too, and an elf.”

“Did Lothdor not fall?!”

“Are you alright? Did you have to run?”

“Are you injured? Don’t worry, my brothers, this place is safe!”

Many voices echoed around the Rock Hall.

Ghelreis’s face crumpled. I, too, unconsciously grit my teeth.

“How is the war going?”

“Come over and talk.”

“You must have had a hard time.”

A large number of skeletons were calling out to us.

Gathered near a sturdy defensive barrier, they stood wearing armor, with axes in their hands and shields on their backs, full of the will to fight. They had been reduced to undead, their rational minds probably half-consumed by the attachments they had held in life, and even now they still continued to fight, not even understanding what had become of themselves, to protect their already long-lost homeland.



Ghelreis pressed his lips together tightly and breathed in and out several times before he finally managed to squeeze out one word. “Everyone.”

“Ohh!”

“You, you’re Ghelreis!”

“I thought you escaped.”

“What about the people? Are they safe?”

“Why are you here?”

Having no eyeballs, the skeletons had no normal sense of vision. They must have recognized him through some supernatural sense.

“Could it be you snuck away from the group and came back?!”

“Hahaha. How very like you.”

“You’ll be in for it when the Captains hear about this.”

“But you have guts.”

“Indeed. Having you will be a tremendous help. Come, let us fight together.”

The skeletons laughed loudly. Ghelreis tried to say something, but the words caught in his throat. Nothing else would come out. Who could blame him?

I should probably send them on, I thought, and went to take a step forward when someone grabbed my shoulder. I turned around.

“Al...”

Al—Vindalfr was there. He had a serious expression unlike any I’d seen from him before. In his eyes dwelt a dignified light. “Let me. I think I should be the

one to tell them.”

I watched him walk towards them. There was no need to lend him a hand. That was how I felt.

“My lord?”

“Lord Aurvangr?”

“No, but it can’t be. His Highness should be in the throne room.”

Al stepped forward in front of the murmuring skeletons.

“My name is Vindalfr!” He struck the long handle of his halberd against the stone floor. “I inherit the blood of Aurvangr, final ruler of the Iron Country!”

The skeletons stirred again upon hearing these words.

“Final?”

“He will not be the final.”

“Not as long as we are here.”

“Yes.”

“Look at us. Our spirit remains strong as ever.”

“As long as we remain standing, the Iron Country has not yet fallen.”

“Yes. It has not fallen.”

“It has not fallen.”

Al looked around, not responding to the voices being raised from every direction. “This is a spectacular defensive barrier, well constructed. You must have been mending it and improving it continually for some time.” His face expressed complex emotions that couldn’t be put into simple words. I wondered what he was thinking right now about this sight he’d encountered in the homeland he’d never before visited.

“Sure is.”

“We exhausted all our technical capabilities.”

“We will never allow the demons entrance through the West Gate.”

“The Iron Country will never fall.”

“Yes. It will never fall.”

Voice after voice denied ruin.

“I understand. I understand.” Al accepted those voices. And then, he screamed, “But even so, the Iron Country has fallen!” It was a pained, heartrending scream. “You warriors all died! Our monarch Aurvangr perished! Lothdor withered pitifully, and the Iron Country became the Rust Mountains, infested by demons and a dragon!”

Ghelreis, Menel, Reystov—none of them said a word.

“That... cannot... be.”

“It will not fall.”

“The Iron Country will not fall.”

“It will never fall.”

But now, some of the skeletons had started to make quiet groans.

“You know it is true! As brave warriors and dwarves, do not avert your eyes!” Al’s voice beat the truth against them, again and again. And before I knew it, the skeleton’s voices had also begun to wither. Their faces no longer had any expressions, but I felt as if I could see them filling with despair.

“But still...” Al drew a deep breath and shouted even louder. “But still, you warriors!” The halberd that had once belonged to Ewen the Immense struck stone once again. It had a crisp sound, the kind that called a person to attention and made them stand up straight. “My grandfather Aurvangr did strike back at the foul-dragon and stole away one of its eyes! It is a hero’s accomplishment, praised even by the gods!” Al’s natural voice echoed around the Rock Hall. “And I... I, Vindalfr, have rushed here with heroes of this modern age to carry on his great feat!”

His back was no longer curved.

“All you warriors! The Iron Country has fallen! It has fallen without doubt! But may our creator Blaze and the god of the flame Gracefeel hear my words on their holy thrones—”

The skeletons' drooping heads began to rise.

"I swear to you here! That on the names of the good gods and the countless spirits of our ancestors, I will take back the Iron Country and its former prosperity!"

They were powerful words, words of zeal that lit a fire inside the heart. There was no timid hunched-over dwarf standing there anymore. Instead—

"The fire of the furnace still burns! The flames shall spread from your divine torch and purge the rust, and the mountains of rust shall be mountains of iron once again!"

A lord stood before us.

The skeletons moaned. But the tone was different from before.

And then Al walked up to each of them in turn. He held their hands, smiled at them with a face on the brink of tears, and spoke to them. "So... please... enough. Rest now. You have all done well." Each time, another of the skeletons returned to ash.

For a while, the Rock Hall was filled with the sounds of axes, shields, and armor clattering to the stone floor.



After the final corpse had crumbled to the floor, Al turned around. His expression made him look like a completely different person. Maybe all the things he'd experienced up until now had changed him, or maybe it was that one instant. Perhaps it was both. People tend to have aspects that rarely change, but sometimes, a person can change into something unrecognizable in a single moment.

"Well said. Well said, young master." Ghelreis's voice was full of emotion. "Let us purge the demons and accomplish this without fail. Young master, this bag of bones will protect you even if it costs him his life."

"Please don't let it cost you your life," Al said with a wry smile. "There are still many things I need you to teach me. About these mountains, and about battle."

As Al said this without a hint of tension, Menel clapped him on the shoulder.

“The revival of a country. Brother, what a pain-in-the-ass oath you made for yourself. You didn’t need to get so serious about it. That was dumb.”

Al shook his head. “No, it wasn’t so dumb.”

“Oh?”

“Unlike the oaths that you two made, Menel, Sir Will, mine has an end. So who’s the dumb one?” he said mischievously.

“You got me.” Menel laughed.

Reystov nodded, completely cool as always. “To fulfill that oath, first we need to win. And survive.”

“Right!” Al nodded, then looked back at me. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Will. Shall we go? I await your instructions.”

Hearing how humbly he prompted me, I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “No more ‘Sir.’”

“Huh?”

“Having royalty as my squire would be a little too much, don’t you think?”

There were appearances and authority and things like that to think about. If Al was going to set his mind on taking back his country and becoming its ruler, I couldn’t always have him bowing his head to me. So I decided to tell him that now was a good point to end our relationship as knight and squire, master and disciple.

Al suddenly got all flustered. “What?! B-But, um, Sir Will!”

“Look, I said no more ‘Sir.’ The determination you just showed and that oath, you meant them, didn’t you?”

“Of course!” His answer was instant. He strode up to me and looked directly up at me. “I will not break my oath to the gods and my ancestors.” Then his tone became even stronger. “But Sir Will, you will still always be Sir Will to me. You are my one and only master, and I respect you.”

His imploring eyes took the wind out of my sails. In his hand, he was gripping the handle of Blood’s dagger, which I had gifted him.

“Is that so...”

“Of course it’s so. Just because I call myself a ruler doesn’t change my feelings of respect.” Al’s determination looked firm.

“I guess we’ll have to keep it, then.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, and Al?” I smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “You did well. I’m proud of you. And they must have been happy, too.”

“Thank you!” Al nodded, smiling brightly. Then, as if he had suddenly realized something, mixed feelings showed in his expression. “I wonder if I should be a little bit grateful to the god of undeath, too.”

As someone serving the god of the flame, it was a little hard for me to agree with that. But still, there was no doubt that the reason the warriors had been able to pass on happily was because of Stagnate’s blessing. The only problem was that it was also due to Stagnate’s blessing that they had gotten so lost and spent the last two hundred years suffering from their obsession. I could only make the same kind of complicated expression myself.

“J-Just a little is probably okay,” I said to him.

He laughed nervously and offered a small prayer to the god of undeath as well. I got the feeling that my god was making an incredibly sour face, but I apologized in my mind, asking for her understanding. “Right then,” I said, after a breath.

“Ya.”

Our conversation reached a stopping point, and everyone took that as a cue to take hold of their weapons again. I could hear sounds in the distance, coming through all of the Rock Hall’s passages, that seemed to be getting closer. Among them were heavy footsteps and light footsteps, dragging noises, grating noises, and eerie cries.

“It was necessary, but it seems we’ve taken a little too long.”

It seemed that the demons had finally picked up on our intrusion. But it was too late now.

“Let’s go,” I said, holding up my spear. “To take back the Iron Mountains and the country of the dwarves.”

From here, the task was simple. Push forward, farther and farther forward, and cut and kill and slash and slay.

“On the flame of Gracefeel!”



The first thrust of my spear pierced the bat-like wings of the wiry demon in front of me. As it fell, I kicked it as hard as I could. A strong impact shook my greave. I had definitely shattered its skull. Not stopping to check, I swung Pale Moon around again with a shout. I swept aside several smaller demons in one swing, smashing them into a wall and destroying them.

These were strikes with no technique, just pure muscle power, but in a melee like this, going wild and never letting up was a better idea than overthinking things. Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force.

After smashing and destroying the remainder of the mob as well, fully repulsing the attack from the rear, I turned to look at the others. The group of demons attacking us from the front were being overwhelmed. Pincer attacks are a powerful strategy; however, lacking the power to make the pincer lethal, they had achieved nothing more than splitting apart their own forces, making each side a target for being individually destroyed.

The wide stone passage continued to fill with the crumbling dust of defeated demons. Reystov in particular was displaying incredible fighting skills at the front of the line. He was unstoppable death incarnate. The moment he encountered an enemy, he leaped into range and killed it with a swift thrust straight out of his normal stance. In the rare case that they survived the hit or that several foes charged at him at once, he would chain together attacks and kill them all before they had any say in the matter.

That was all he was doing when it came down to it, but that simplicity was his strength. No matter what kind of enemy came or from where, he would get the first strike and make it lethal. He would crush his opponent with the strongest attack at first encounter, never giving them the chance to dictate the pace of the fight. It was a simple style of relentlessly forcing his greatest strength onto

his opponents.

To undo his strategy, one would either have to unleash an incredibly cunning scheme or use simple strength or numbers to give Reystov more than he could handle. But Reystov was a solidly high-level master of the sword, and on top of that, his favorite weapon now packed extra ferocity, having been strengthened by Gus's Signs among other things. Just now, a few demons had attempted to shoot him and cast magic at him from outside his range, but they crumbled to the ground after being impaled through the throat and spinal cord by his sword's "extending thrust."

Reystov was untouchable. And now, Al was learning a lot from him about how to fight. Al had always been quick at absorbing knowledge, picking up techniques and attitudes like sand absorbing water, but I'd never felt it as strongly as right now.

As if he had copied Reystov's boldness and simply imprinted it on himself, Al leaped into dense patches of enemies and swept them away with his Immense halberd before they could manage a response. Its thick and bulky blade was sized like a traffic sign or something from my old world. The sight of Al bellowing as he sliced demons in half with it was pretty amazing to behold.

No matter what enemy appeared, Al would force them to face his phenomenal physical strength and heavy weapon, obliterating all their defenses and sending them flying. That was probably the bedrock of Reystov's fighting style, and Al had picked it up from him.

Three demons had just come charging at him at the same time. One giant swing of his halberd cleaved them all through the chest. He was like a small tempest.

"There should be a branch coming up next. Take the right."

Ghelreis, on the other hand, wasn't getting directly involved much. He just gave us directions as he watched Reystov and Al grow the pile of demon corpses at a frightful pace. From time to time, he would lumber into action and deliver a mighty finishing blow to a demon who was still breathing or use his large shield to cover a tiny gap in Reystov and Al's defense.

There was absolutely nothing flashy about his work, but it was a great source

of relief to know that we had backup waiting, with strength in reserve, who could trade places with us if needed. The reason Reystov and Al were able to go so wild was a result of Ghelreis's intelligent support. He truly was quietly brilliant.

"Got it nice and easy back here thanks to our tough-as-nails front line," Menel said casually while firing his bow. Silver-string produced an airy note, and the glint of the mithril arrowhead shot through the air. At the end of the passage, beyond the darkness and miasma, something gave up a mortal cry. We made our way forward and discovered, in the process of turning to dust, the remains of a Commander-ranked demon shot through the heart.

At a whistle from Menel, winged fairies danced playfully through the air, retrieved the arrow that had come to the end of its flight, and carried it back into his hands. Menel's gaze as he accepted it was the complete opposite of his casual expression.

He manipulated the elementals of earth to trip up dangerous demons, and he used the elementals of air to prevent his enemies from being able to utter Words. The support of the fairies was extremely precise, striking directly at critical points and demonstrating Menel's full potential as the linchpin of our defense.

"And thanks to all the demons piling in, there's no need to watch out for traps, either," he added.

It wasn't all bad news that waves of demons were coming one after another. The fact that these were passages that demons continued to pour through meant that the dangerous traps must either have been removed or set off by rank-and-file demons. There was little danger to us in following the path they'd already taken. That was the reason I could afford to break up our previous formation and put Al and Reystov, who were very good at forcing their way through enemies, in charge of the front.

"Will, are you okay by yourself back there?"

"Hm? There's not much pressure coming from the rear. I'll be fine on my own."

The demons were launching sporadic attacks from the back as well to

pressure us, but these I was handling by myself, eliminating every enemy that came my way.

Demon armies were more of a hassle than human ones. The Soldiers were all savage warriors with no fear of death, and the Commanders were just the same, with the addition that many of them were also users of magic and blessings. If a large number of fearless Soldiers forced me into a chaotic battle in a relatively wide and open place with constant long-range attacks from Commanders and Generals, even I could find myself checkmated.

That was why I had laid out a plan for outflanking our enemy to get inside the tunnel-filled Iron Country. This approach gave us a good chance of victory. At the risk of repeating myself, if a pincer attack is carried out without the power to make the pincer lethal, it's nothing more than a division of forces that makes each side a target for individual destruction.

"Rear guard all by yourself and not breaking a sweat. You're as ridiculous as ever. Gods."

"It's not really like that."

If I'd been on my own, I was sure that I'd have built up so much mental fatigue that I'd definitely have made some kind of mess-up by now. The only reason I was able to push myself so far was because I had allies whom I could leave the other side to.



"Ghelreis, how far along are we now?"

"We've avoided the main route where we'd have been more easily surrounded and descended to the third level through the side paths. Soon will be the Hall of Light, and I expect the dragon will be in the Great Cavern beyond that."

We pressed onward, calmly crushing our enemies as they came. I had no idea where the leader of the demons would be; however, there were only a limited number of places in the dwarves' underground kingdom where a dragon could indulge in a long slumber.

"Long ago, our forefathers drained the stagnant water from an underground

lake and created the Great Cavern. It lies at the very core of the Iron Country.”

There the dragon was entrenched, and in all probability, he was waiting for us—Calamity’s Sickle, with its golden eye.

“The demons should work out that we’re heading towards the dragon. Assuming they lie in wait for us, where would that be?”

“The Hall of Light, I imagine. It’s the throne room where Lord Aurvangr gave his last speech so many years ago.”

“We have to take it back,” Al mumbled.

I nodded too. “Yep. Let’s take it back.”

We meant the throne—and also the crown. They were just symbols, but that was also what made them important.

“All that work for a symbol? Whatever floats your boat, I guess. I’ll back you up.”

“Me, too. Everything taken should be taken back.”

Menel and Reystov nodded and continued forward, beating the hell out of even more demons. They poured out in great swarms, but the majority of them were Soldiers, or Commanders at worst. Pitted against accomplished warriors, they might as well have been scarecrows.

We traveled through dim stone passages one after another that twisted and branched, sometimes into up and down routes and sometimes with stairs. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of light.

“Huh?”

A strong, warm light, at odds with this underground space, spread out from a rectangular doorway. It looked like the entrance to a world of light. When we stepped inside, a bright space was there, a vast space with lines of many pillars. There was a chalk ceiling, and a smooth floor in which I couldn’t see any joins. All over the ceiling were lines of magic lights cut from clear crystal with Signs carved into them. It was beautiful, dazzling lighting, as though the light of the sun had been replicated within the room.

I didn’t have to be told to know that this was the Hall of Light, the seat of the

monarch. And dead ahead, opposite the entrance and at the other end of the rows of pillars, was the throne. It was beautiful and decoratively carved, and sat on it was a single demon.

How could I describe that classless demon sitting brazenly upon the throne? The first words that came to mind were “humanoid insect.” The green shell like a jewel beetle’s that encased its two-meter-tall muscular body made it look almost like a samurai in full armor. In its hands was a horrifyingly thick, spiked club. The demon had the mouthparts of an insect, complete with mandibles. And like some kind of sick joke, on top of its head, in addition to a pair of feelers, sat the crown.

If I remembered correctly, this was a General-ranked demon: a Scarabaeus.

“Sir Will...” After looking at the figure of the demon for a while, Al’s expression turned serious. “Let me do it.”

“Al—no, Vindalfr. Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Al marched forward, no longer turning around to reply.

“Wh—Hey!”

“It’s okay, Menel. Let him go.”

“You want to talk about it first?! That’s a fig General! His chances are—”

“Even so, this is Al’s fight.” I said it so strongly that Menel fell silent. “It’s the fight of a king for his throne.” Menel didn’t look at all happy about it, but a warrior’s pride was at stake. This was a battle in which none of us could afford to interfere.



In the chalk pillar hall filled with light, Al marched confidently towards the throne, which was placed on a slightly higher level than the rest of the room. The beetle-demon—the Scarabaeus—languidly rose to its feet.

I could feel a prickling in the air as mana converged on the spiked club in its hands. And I could tell even from its emotionless, bug-like exterior that it held strong contempt for its diminutive challenger and had confidence bordering on arrogance in its own power. Even though its forces had been thoroughly

slaughtered and its territory encroached upon, it was probably convinced that it could simply deal with us itself and there would be absolutely no problem.

As Ghelreis watched Al march forward, he took a fresh look at the demon and muttered, “I don’t like the look on it.”

I thought the same thing. But the demon’s arrogant confidence wasn’t without basis. Even though it may have borrowed the power of the foul-dragon to do it, this beetle-demon had in fact been the fall of the Iron Country, wiping out an entire army of dwarves who were prepared to fight to the death.

“It’s strong,” I replied.

If this was the supreme commander of the demon army that the High King had dispatched to the Iron Mountains, it would most likely mean that it was at least the equal of the horned demon called a Cernunnos that I’d fought in the Lord of Holly’s domain. It was probably stronger.

With humans, a commander’s rank and their prowess in battle don’t necessarily match up, but when it came to demons, the ones of higher rank were generally stronger and smarter. If it were me fighting it, the odds would likely be in my favor. The beetle-demon did look solid and had magical armor I couldn’t identify, but I thought I’d still be able to overcome it. For Al, though, this might yet be too difficult an opponent.

“You’re gonna let him die ‘cause of some pigshit warrior hang-up?” Menel said with a very sour look on his face. “You’re not the only one who taught him, you know.”

“Yeah, I agree.” Reystov nodded. “But either way...”

“Yes. We probably won’t be able to find the time to get involved.”

Just as Al began to close in on the Scarabaeus, the demon raised a sickening cry from its mouthparts. At the same time, the Hall of Light’s dazzling illumination dimmed. The light from the Sign-engraved crystals had been obscured by winged demons descending on us from all angles.

“Fig!” Menel shot through several of them in such quick succession that it would have been impossible to follow the movements of his hands. Demons fell one after another onto the highly polished floor.

This was what it came down to. Demons didn't possess the poetic sense to entertain the idea of a one-on-one fight in any case, and there was no advantage to them in doing so. It was obvious that they would surround us here and go for the kill. That was the real reason I had allowed Al to go alone.

"Now I get it," Menel said. "Hey, Al! If it looks like it's not working out, hold out till we win and keep him on his own! Don't you die!"

The best case would be if Al won, of course, but even if he didn't, so long as we could just keep their "strong piece" occupied with our "weak piece," we could turn the tide of battle comfortably in our favor. If Blood had been here, he might have recommended a one-on-one battle without that kind of calculation behind it, but as for me, I didn't romanticize battle like that. It was simply a calculated decision.

But I had no intention of making light of those sorts of ideals. One's pride, one's duty, one's mission—the amount of passion brought about by these formless things sometimes had the power to smash all ordinary predictions and calculations.

"Thank you very much, Menel!" Al called out. "But I will win. I will beat this thing!"

Then he roared. "On the flame and the fire, the mountainfolk shall put thee to death!" He sprinted at the demons' leader with the ferocious roar of a warrior. "Take my dwarven axe!" His halberd cleaved an arc through the air towards the commander of the demons.



The demon's club intercepted the halberd. Splinters flew everywhere. Immediately, the halberd turned, cutting a new arc towards its foe. Roaring, Al chained together attacks with violent intensity, pulling back and swinging around his long-handled axe. Because Al was tall for a dwarf, when he swung around his halberd, he had a moderate edge in reach compared to the Scarabaeus with its club. With this all-out barrage of blows from outside his opponent's range, which reminded me suddenly of Blood and his broadsword, Al was probably intending to make the most of his advantage.

However, I didn't have the luxury of watching intently.



The Hall of Light reverberated with loud footsteps, the shrill screeching of weapons, wails, and deathly cries.

Hordes of Soldier demons attempted repeated assaults against us through the entrance we came in by, and each time, they were crushed by Reystov and Ghelreis. Like a storm, Reystov stabbed, swept, and cut them down with his blade of mana. The ones who managed to narrowly evade his attacks were checked by Ghelreis waiting to the side and smashed to pulp.

Just as a lion doesn't fear a herd of gazelles, and a wolf doesn't fear a flock of sheep, the two trained warriors didn't fear these hordes of demons and in fact were driving them away. I too readied my spear, pointing it towards a demon that was starting to get too close and held a curved sword in its hand.

All around the hall, demons that had probably been waiting in ambush here the entire time were appearing. They were mostly Commanders, but occasionally there were some of higher level that were likely approaching General rank. Brandishing Pale Moon, I stabbed them, slammed them, and destroyed them one by one.

A chill ran down the nape of my neck. I instinctively bent backward. Something swept by where my throat had just been. Then came a second and third strike. I parried the slash and the thrust mostly by gut feeling and took a large leap backwards to dodge. I'd definitely knocked away something, but I still couldn't see a thing.

"Cadere Araneum!" I incanted a Word, dropping down a web of magic. Entangled in the web, there was something in a place where nothing seemed to be. Maybe this demon had hidden its form with the Word of Invisibility, or maybe it was always invisible to begin with. I had no time to check. As the enemy struggled, I swung down my spear and crushed it. "There's invisible enemies here!"

"Oh, for hell's sake! 'Gnome and Sylph, dance hand in hand! Whirlwinds of ochre and curtains of dust!'" Immediately after I shouted, Menel called to the elementals of air, and dusty winds blew about the hall. It was the spell Ochre Dust. We fired arrows and threw daggers one after another into the places where the dust warped strangely, and invisible foes let out cries of mortal

agony.

Menel dashed around the battlefield keeping a reasonable distance from the rest of us, prioritizing flying demons, spellcasters, and enemies with frustrating abilities like that invisibility and taking them out at frightening speed. I felt grateful that because of him, I didn't have to be too wary of back attacks and could focus on using my muscle power to tackle the things in front of me.

That said, I also couldn't afford not to use my head.

"Currere Oleum."

After completing a sideways sweep with the blade of my spear, I cast a Word and ran grease across the floor. Several of the enemy group fell flat on the ground. As they struggled to escape while covered in grease, I ran each of them through with the blade of my spear. The tricks I'd inherited from Gus for the specialized use of magic for crowd control were as versatile as ever.

Once the enemy forces had eased off a little, I breathed out and took a glance around at the situation. Reystov and Ghelreis were still fighting and holding an advantage.

I took a look over at Al as he let out a loud roar.

From a series of overhead swings hammered down with all his might, he suddenly changed direction and executed a precise foot sweep. But it wasn't just any foot sweep; the Scarabaeus's foot had been taken out by a halberd with a metal hook. Its left ankle twisted violently.

"■■■■!"

The demon let out an inhuman scream, its mouthparts making scratchy insectile noises, and it collapsed to the ground. Al stepped forward. He raised his halberd high into the air. He was going for the kill.

That instant, the demon grinned.

The Scarabaeus dodged the axeblood and jumped, as though it had no ankle injury at all.

"Wh—"

No, it wasn't "as though." As if by a miracle, its wound was *actually gone*.

“Blessing!”

By the time I realized it, it was too late. The attack that Al had put his whole body into had missed, and the demon, laughing raucously, slammed its club into his torso.



“Gah—”

Al’s feet left the ground, and he slammed back-first into a pillar. At the same time, there was a flash. Layers of chains made of mana wrapped themselves around Al’s body, binding him to the pillar. The club had the Sign of Spellbinding engraved into it!

It looked as if Al had managed to take the blow itself on his armor, but there was no way to avoid the damage to his organs. He had just barely kept hold of his halberd, but those magical chains couldn’t be destroyed by physical strength. He was in mortal danger.

Demons were warriors who knew no fear, and the higher-level ones among them were sometimes sorcerers or priests of the god of dimensions, Dyrhygma. I should have known that they would use blessings just like me!

I grunted in frustration. I wanted to fire off the Word “Dispel Magic,” but doing so wasn’t so easy. As two demons came at me from the left and right, I exploited a slight mismatch in their coordination, first kicking one away and then immediately turning adroitly and stabbing the other. But even in that small amount of time, the next attack from another demon was already heading my way. I whipped my spear down and smashed the demon to the ground. This really wasn’t the kind of situation where I could afford to give Al a helping hand.

“Dammit!” Menel cursed. He had his hands full as well.

Reystov and Ghelreis, too, were stretched to their limits dispatching hordes of demons. The beetle-demon clicked its mouthparts and laughed unsettlingly as it drew close to Al, who was still chained to the pillar.

“Al!” I couldn’t help but shout.

“I’m... fine.” Amid the noise of battle, for some reason, I could make out his

voice—and the heat that filled his words. “I will not lose.” The indestructible chains groaned. “I swear on my oath and on the dreams of my kin...”

Al’s face turned bright red as he pulled at the chains with all his might. The pillar to which he was chained seemed to warp. It groaned. Fissures ran through it—

“I will...”

The Scarabaeus realized what was about to happen, and it raised its spiked club in a panic, ready to strike. But it was too late.

“Take back our homeland!”

The pillar that the magic chains were wrapped around broke apart. The chains slackened. Al’s halberd, which he had swung up from below to intercept the demon’s club, had at some point become engulfed in bright-red fire. I felt the aura of a god. It was a brave, manly aura that was neither the god of the flame’s nor the god of undeath’s. I got the feeling that the corners of his mouth had curled up into an awkward smile.

Al bellowed. The axeblood imbued with divine fire traced a crimson trail and sent the spiked club flying through the air with the Scarabaeus’s hand still attached. But the beetle-demon was itself a storied warrior. Disregarding its sliced-off hand, it drew a dagger with its other hand and charged forward, trusting in the defense of its shell.

But that was nothing other than a blunder. *That was Al’s range.*

He grabbed hold of the Scarabaeus’s arm. He bent down low and pulled it towards him, just as I’d taught him, with the same movement I’d used when I threw the forest giant. There was a mighty roar. A large body flew through the air, and the King of the Iron Country slammed the invading demons’ supreme commander to the ground.

It may have been protected by a tough shell, but the impact shook through its body, knocking the breath out of it. Yet the demon showed a dogged refusal to be beaten. Out of nowhere, it issued four jointed, insectile limbs from its body and wrapped them around Al, pulling him in towards it. The two fell to the ground and rolled, fighting. Then, a piercing, alien scream arose from the

tangle. Sticking into a gap in the Scarabaeus's shell near its neck was a right-wield stiletto. Blood's favorite custom dagger would not permit its opponent to fight back at this range, and healing miracles would be of little help to the demon with that blade still lodged into its neck.

"What you've taken—" Al held the struggling demon down and forced the blade in farther still. "You will return!"

The demon twitched two or three times. Then, at last, it stopped moving completely.

Blood's voice, which I remembered so fondly, revived once more in my mind.

— One thing is always on their minds, day in and day out. The question of what is worth laying down their life for. What is their reason to fight.

"The enemy general," Al yelled, "is slain!"

— And when they find it, they go into battle with their souls burning with the fire of courage, and never once fear death.

"Wow..."

You were right, Blood. You really were. It was just as you said.

Dwarves are true warriors.



After Al had claimed the head of the Scarabaeus, the demons who had been surging towards us until that point suddenly slowed. Perhaps they had been under the Blessing of Frenzy, which the evil gods often gave to their followers.

If this was a story, the enemy would probably have taken flight at this point. However, it seemed that the demons weren't such easy foes. The mere death of their general hadn't caused them to lose the will to fight or their ranks to collapse. On the contrary, a few Commander demons immediately took over leadership and rallied the Soldier demons, putting up a strong resistance; meanwhile, several demons with bat wings flew around the hall, perhaps trying to take back the head of their leader. They darted at Al, who had mostly checked out mentally after claiming the demon's head.

"You feckers!" Menel shot down most of them, firing arrows in quick

succession, but finally his quiver was empty. Two demons came from above, descending quickly upon Al. There wasn't time for him to defend—

I tossed my shield aside, bent my body backward, and hurled Pale Moon with all my strength.

It wasn't a spear meant for throwing, but my body was well trained and my weapon familiar, and they answered my unreasonable request regardless. Two dying screams overlapped. Its blade glinting and its handle bending, the spear I had thrown had flown through the hall, impaled the two demons through the chest, and pinned them to a distant pillar.

"We're not done, Al!" I called out. "Keep it up just a little longer!"

Coming to his senses, Al shouted back, "Yes, sir!"

Blood had told me once in the past that on the battlefield, the moment when a warrior defeats a strong foe and claims their head is the moment when they leave themselves the most vulnerable. I even had a memory of a relevant picture I'd seen in my previous world, in a book about Japanese history. I think it was about the Sengoku period or Edo or something. It had showed a warrior in the process of claiming the head of the enemy he'd defeated getting his own head chopped off by a different enemy. It showed that the moment of sweet victory is exactly when defeat and loss creep up on you.

Even as my mind wandered over these irrelevant thoughts, my trained body never stopped moving. Seeing that I'd lost my weapon, a demon swung its two-handed greatsword down towards me. I stepped towards it and to the side, dodging the swing. Then I placed both my hands on the back of the handle and continued the arc downwards, forcing the swing of my opponent's sword to continue beyond the point where it should have stopped. The natural limits of the demon's body prevented it from keeping hold of the sword.

And then I snatched it.

At the same time, using the momentum from my opponent's swing, I sliced the demon wide open from its thigh to its stomach with its own sword. In terms of time, it was a mere moment. From the demon's perspective, in the single instant it had swung its sword down, its opponent had dodged and closed in, and simultaneously its sword had disappeared from its hands and its thigh had

been slashed. The demon might not even have understood what had happened. While thinking that I'd never expected to use this showy technique in an actual battle, I swung the sword I'd stolen without a moment's hesitation and finished the demon off.

To be honest, this weapon's center of mass was a little too close to the hilt, and I wasn't very fond of two-handed greatswords. However, under Blood's teaching, I had learned how to handle pretty much anything that could be called a weapon. Whatever a weapon's intended purpose, as long as it wasn't something difficult like a chain weapon, I could probably use it, and I wasn't about to be choosy in a situation like this.

Another demon charged towards me. I gave it a slight opening which it took, attacking me head-on. With perfect timing, I pulled one leg back and dodged, then countered by chopping off its hand at the wrist.

It was useful, and honestly to be expected given the greatsword's weight, that all I had to do was connect and wrists would fly off regardless of bone or anything else. I personally preferred spears, but I felt like maybe I could understand why Blood had adored two-handed swords so much.

I continued brandishing the greatsword for a while, lopping off limbs and chopping through torsos. Then, I checked the situation around me again.

Reystov was breathing quite hard. I couldn't blame him. He'd been going too wild for too long by this point. Ghelreis was similar. Only the sound of heavy breathing could be heard from beneath his helmet. Even Menel, who commanded a view of the whole battlefield and had been lending his support to everyone, was starting to dull, and Al was hard at work protecting him in spite of his own injuries.

If we continued this much longer, we really would reach our limits. But now that we'd killed the majority of the high-level demons, the rest of them were starting to show signs of faltering. It was about time I acted. I dashed at the final Commander I could spot, chopped off its head, and belted the Word of Departure at the demons in the hall.

"Discede!"

I felt a colorless, transparent pulse of mana spread out from me like a wave.

We had secured the upper hand now. The point of this attack, using a Word that left strong mental effects, was to give the demons a final extra push.

The demons who were hit by it cringed and stopped dead in their tracks. Some of them who were especially weak or took a direct hit from the Word immediately turned to dust and crumbled where they stood, and the rest who survived finally started to scatter.



The demons started to flee. Al must have been at his limit; he sunk to the floor on the spot.

Menel and Reystov, who were used to fighting for real, summoned the last of their energy to sink arrows and blades into the backs of the escaping demons, inflicting as much damage on their forces as possible. Even though they had lost their leadership, having demons on the loose would be a recipe for chaos in this area. The fewer of them there were, the better. If our enemies were showing us their backs, we had a duty to take them out and not ignore them.

Meanwhile, Ghelreis kept a vigilant watch, and as for me, after finally taking a moment to catch my breath, I set about healing everyone's wounds.

"Gracefeel, goddess of the flame, grant us healing and vitality..." I put my hands together and prayed. Warm light flowed from everyone's wounds, returning them to normal as if the injuries had never existed there to begin with. However, I couldn't bring back the stamina everyone had used up. We couldn't afford to get overconfident.

After that, we did a once-over to make sure there weren't still any enemies hiding anywhere. After we confirmed that we had completely chased the demons from the Hall of Light, we all shared smiles again. Each of us spontaneously raised a hand, and the crisp, refreshing sound of palms clapping against palms reverberated around the hall. My arms were tired, but a gentle warmth was left behind in my palm. It was the warmth of victory.

"Thought we were really gonna die there," Menel said, laughing in relief. "Turns out charging into the main base of the demons with just the five of us was pretty reckless." He put an arm around Al's shoulder. "Good job, brother! You really pulled it out of the bag!"

“N-No, I hardly...”

“No, you holding the boss back made it a ton easier for us to go all out,” said Reystov.

Ghelreis nodded, too. “If their general had been allowed behind us, we could have been smothered and killed.”

I was in total agreement as well. “It was you who took them back. The mountain, and the crown.”

I picked the crown off the Scarabaeus’s head, which was rolling on the ground, and tried to hand it to Al. However, he turned it down with a shake of his head. “No. Not yet. We still haven’t taken everything back.”

After hearing his voice so full of determination, I nodded too. He was right. Indeed, we hadn’t yet taken back the whole of these mountains. The dragon remained.

“But if we do take it all back, Sir Will, I’d like you to be the one to crown me.”

“What? That’s a job for a high-level priest, isn’t it?”

“You *are* a high-level priest, numbnuts!”

“Huh? Oh... So I am.”

Everyone burst into laughter. I laughed, too. It had only just occurred to me that we could laugh. We could all still laugh.

Our opponent was going to be a strong foe the likes of which we’d never faced. It was difficult to call our situation ideal, but battle was always like that. Even if the situation left a lot to be desired, we had to do the best with the cards we had. We’d used up quite a bit of stamina, but we were still brimming with the will to fight. Our spirits hadn’t been dampened. We were in the best condition we could hope for right now.

“Let’s go. We’ll start by putting all the magic and blessings we can on us ahead of time.”

“Wait.” Reystov was frowning.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look over there.” He pointed to the area in the center of the hall, where countless demons had turned to dust. There were little mountains of the stuff all over the place.

“Huh?” Al tilted his head. Then, all at once, he turned completely pale. “It’s gone.”

“Gone? What’s gone?”

“The Scarabaeus’s body!”

“What?! Wait a fig second, we’ve got the head right here...”

We had its head. But—only now did I realize—*it hadn’t turned to dust!* Demons, who were visitors from another dimension, always turned to dust when they were killed. Sometimes weapons or other small parts of them would remain, but nothing like this.

“It ran off...”

“Will, slow down, brother, how the hell could a body without a head—”

“If its body is like a bug’s, there’s a chance. Haven’t you ever seen a bug moving after its head’s been pulled off?”

Insects have a rope-ladder-like nerve cord running throughout their body from the cerebral ganglion that corresponds to their brain. I remembered reading somewhere in my previous life that it was one of the unique features of insects’ bodies that they could distribute their information processing because of that structure. In other words, if that beetle-demon’s body resembled a bug’s on the inside as well...

“It had its head taken off and it still ran. I don’t know how capable of thought it is right now, but...”

Some high-level miracles could regenerate missing body parts. I had my doubts whether a head could be regenerated—such a thing was impossible to test or verify for humans—but it wouldn’t be at all surprising to me if it was possible for demons.

“Menel, track it.”

“Got it!” Menel immediately started tracking its movements.

While he worked, I began placing effects and strengthening magic on everyone. If we allowed the general to get away and rebuild its forces, we would be done for. There was every chance that next time, we really would be surrounded and killed.

“After it!”

Everyone raised a battle cry.



Tracking the Scarabaeus took us out of the Hall of Light and following passages even deeper into the heart of the mountains.

Ghelreis said, “This is the way to the Great Cavern.”

“Maybe it went to get help from the dragon?”

“Possible. But it’s also possible it can’t think much and it’s just running blindly wherever its body takes it.”

I hoped it was the latter.

With a full set of strengthening magic upon us in preparation for an encounter with the dragon, we ran through the labyrinthine stone passages, shining up our surroundings with the light of our magic lanterns. The farther we advanced, the thicker the miasma became. If the dragon was the one producing this miasma, it had to mean that he was now very close by.

“Be careful, everyone!”

We made our way through the corridors, passing dusty, ancient rooms and halls. We crossed bridges over deep chasms. And finally, we reached a large, dark hall.

I couldn’t tell just how large it was; even with the range and brightness of Pale Moon’s blade set to their maximum, its light didn’t reach the far walls. It must have been an enormous smithy. Furnaces full of cold ash from which the fire was long gone were lined up like rows of giant tombstones. I could imagine that long ago, next to these roaring furnaces, experienced craftworkers had yelled at their apprentices over the racket of clanging hammers. There would have been songs to set the pace of the work as the contraption for transporting the ore

clattered to and fro. But now, the fires were gone and the hammers had ceased; there were no voices of dwarves and no machines in motion. The darkness and silence was total.

Ghelreis, who knew how this place had once been, clenched his teeth. “Let us not lose track of it.”

“Yes.”

Nodding, we followed the demon’s trail.

It wasn’t very long before we were able to find the Scarabaeus. It had its back to us, facing the darkness of the Great Cavern, and it was making some very animated movements. It craned back and raised both its hands high above where its head should have been, as if pleading to a higher power for salvation.

At that exact moment, the demon was crushed.

Replacing it in my vision was a huge—altogether too huge—scaly arm. The General that Al had struggled so hard to defeat, who had been one of the highest-ranked demons there was, had been squashed like a mosquito in a single strike.

“Ghaha. How weak.”

From behind the Scarabaeus crumbling to dust came an inhuman laugh.

A black figure was lying there in the darkness. It was massive. No, the word “massive” didn’t even come close to describing it. What came to mind at this moment, as out of place as it was, was my old school in my previous world. If the school building as I looked up at it from the front gate had been a living creature, perhaps it would have made me feel like this.

The silhouette shifted. I was hit by a cloud of heated miasma. I could see the glint of gold and silver in the area around the silhouette, reflecting the light of our magic lanterns.

“Welcome to my bedchamber.”

A golden eye stared at me. I was gripped by an urge to turn around and sprint in the opposite direction. What the hell was I supposed to do against this?

I grit my teeth and tensed my stomach.

“Weakling, mortal, speak thy name.”

The black dragon cloaked in miasma with a golden eye, Valacirca—Calamity’s Sickle—slowly raised his head.

A black and white illustration of a dragon and a woman in a snowy, ethereal landscape. The dragon, with its head in the upper right, has a human-like face with a beard and a crown. The woman, in the center, has long, flowing hair and is looking down. The scene is filled with falling snow and a misty, dreamlike atmosphere. The text "Chapter Four" is positioned in the upper left area.

Chapter Four

He looked exactly like most people's conception of a wicked dragon, stretched out on a mountainous expanse of the dwarves' treasure.

He had obviously strong jaws, twisted horns, and a thick and supple neck. His body was covered with tough scales, and from it grew a pair of large, membranous wings. The sharp, swordlike protrusions running down his spine became progressively smaller as they continued all the way to the tip of his long, elegant tail. They were as beautiful as they were fierce. I could see a brilliant mind in his golden eye shining in the darkness, and in the same body resided a nature that was horrifically vicious and savage.

“Well? Are you not going to name yourself? Struck speechless, I suppose.”

He was so imposing that none of us dared move. My throat felt raw. My heart pounded at a terrific rate. Instinct, reason, and all my senses told me to run, told me that an overwhelming predator was right in front of me!

I acknowledged that terror inside my heart. Fear and anxiety are inner monsters that grow the more you deny them, the more you avert your eyes from them. If I couldn't acknowledge the frightened, cowardly part of myself, if I averted my eyes from it and pretended to be strong, the fear would grow even more vicious in the darkness. What was necessary for confidence was not swagger; what was necessary for bravery was not pretending to be strong. *Everything begins with acceptance*, I remembered Mary telling me. She was never disloyal to herself. She embodied all of this.

“Oh?”

I had to admit it. I was scared of this thing. I was hopelessly scared, and I wanted to run away. Taking conscious control of my breathing, which had become quick and shallow, I slowly inhaled and exhaled. I straightened myself up, raised my chin, tightened my abdominal muscles. Then I looked up at the dragon and asked him, “Shouldn't you give your own name before asking the name of another?”

I was incredibly frightened. But I had decided to accept that and not run regardless.

“Hmm.”

The dragon looked down upon me, and with a noise that was neither a growl nor speech, it breathed miasma-tainted breath out of the corners of its mouth. The hot miasma belching out could have been mistaken for black smoke.

“It seems you are not the common ruck seeking to plunder my treasure.”

Then, stopping to consider, the dragon murmured.

“Of course, you did claim the head of this Scarabaeus leading the mountain demons and put them to flight. There was never the possibility of you being average warriors.”

Seemingly satisfied, the dragon continued.

“In that case, I shall oblige. I am the Gods’ Sickle, Calamity’s Sickle. Born with the light of the final stars, living more moons than the moon itself, I am the king of poison and brimstone and brother to lava—”

The dragon lazily got up. The miasma blasting out heat was so thick now I was almost coughing.

“Valacirca.”

The dragon as old as the gods named himself, spreading his wings with commanding presence.

“Now answer, small one.”

He had given his name in the fixed style I often heard in ancient poetry. I had to respond in kind.

“My grandfather was the Wandering Sage, my father the War Ogre of Leo, and my mother Mater’s Daughter.” I placed my hand on my heart, raised my voice, and named myself. The foul-dragon’s mouth twitched slightly. “People call me the Torch of the Borderlands and the Faraway Paladin. Disciple of Gracefeel, goddess of flux, I am William G. Maryblood.” I gave my name with pride. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, dragon of the age of the gods.”

I made my greeting not too polite and not too informal, and gave it with my head held high. The dragon was silent for a moment.

“Heh... heheh...”

He suddenly started laughing in a low voice, and then spoke at an equally low volume.

“What a coincidence. Familiar names.”

“Familiar?”

“If they had reached me before the demons, it is possible we could have fought together, shoulder to shoulder.”

The dragon seemed to be looking somewhere into the distance. Perhaps he was seeing the Great Collapse of two centuries ago. Gus had said it, too: persuading the dragon to join our own forces was a possible strategy.

“Heheh. I detect a faint smell of the god of undeath. And you are a disciple of the torch. Yes, that explains why the ages don’t add up.”

With just that little information, Valacirca seemed to have guessed my circumstances.

“Now, then. We have talked long enough about names and histories.”

“Yes.” I glanced at my allies. While I was talking, they seemed to have managed to come to terms with the threat posed by the dragon. I was sure they’d contribute. I composed my breathing and prepared for battle.

“Faraway Paladin. Would you be interested in bringing me under your umbrella?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.



My mind went blank for a moment.

“Why are you so surprised?”

The tone of the dragon’s voice was at odds with his words and seemed to contain a taunting grin.

“You have overthrown the mountain demons. I have lost the force I was dependent upon. It would be dangerous and restricting even for me to remain isolated. You must see the necessity for me to seek other forces in which to place my trust.”

There was a jingling sound. In his claws, Valacirca had scooped up some of the countless pieces of treasure scattered all over the room. He looked at it lovingly and with great enjoyment.

“I have my own motives, of course. I will demand a considerable price. But fear not. I have no intention of deliberately butting heads with a champion of your caliber.”

The dragon laughed as he demanded treasure.

It was by no means a bad offer in the short term. The power of a dragon was vast. He would be a great asset to have on our side. However— “In fifty years’ time, you’ll kill me, destroy everything, and shift your loyalty to someone else,” I told him dryly. The beetle-demon had been killed, squashed like a bug. “I’ve seen how you do things.”

The foul-dragon was silent. His body trembled. Just as I braced myself for an attack, he roared with laughter.

“Very good, very good! Exactly!”

His laughter slowly died down. He tilted his head, and a sinister grin spread over his face.

“But don’t you agree? *It’s still a good deal...*”

I fell silent in spite of myself. He had a valid point.

If I maintained the strength to pose a risk to Valacirca as I protected him as part of our forces, it would give the dragon a reason to team up with me. He might serve me relatively loyally, relatively lazily, at least to the extent that he wouldn’t be hostile. In that case, was there actually a need to engage in a fight right now with desperately low chances of victory? After all, the god of undeath had said that my chances of winning would increase with time. Wouldn’t it be better to leave this in the hands of my future self?

“Let me ask you. How much of a reason do you really have to fight me?”

It was like the devil was whispering into my ear. It was easy to tell that Valacirca had probably made this suggestion fully understanding the effect his words would have on me.

“Have I personally harmed anyone close to you? No. Are you a man of such greed you would go after my treasure? I doubt it. And I can see clearly that the fame of slaying a dragon means nothing to you. When I started to awaken, you came here with determination in your heart and a spear in your hand because you thought me a threat to innocent people. Didn’t you?”

Valacirca whispered.

“You see? The threat is gone. I will bow my head to you...”

None of my allies could say a thing. This development was so much to process, they couldn’t even gather their thoughts to speak. My mind too was overloaded. What was this? What the *hell* was this? In some part of my mind, I’d been thinking of Valacirca as a creature on a rampage with nothing more to him than his strength. Did that describe me more than him?

“Now choose, Faraway Paladin, hero of the modern age.”

A shiver ran down my spine. His golden eye pierced me.

“Will it be peace... or else, battle and death?”

As hot miasma hissed out of both corners of his mouth, the question posed by Calamity’s Sickle echoed throughout the Great Cavern and filled it with dread.



I’d planned to fight the dragon. But the dragon was trying to bow its head to me.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Does my history with the dwarves bother you? Certainly, I held the demons as my masters, fought the dwarves, and gained treasure from it, but that is the way of hired work, is it not? If my new masters say that they cannot restore the mountain while poison fills the air, then I will gladly move elsewhere.”

He was scheming, of course. He spoke rationally of the risks and costs, and occasionally a malicious smile crossed his face and he said things including:

“You are a hero, are you not? Show you have what it takes to handle me.”

This utterly unanticipated development had my mind on the verge of chaos. Logically speaking, what the dragon was saying made sense. It sounded correct

from the viewpoint of efficiency and risk management. If I avoided battle with the dragon and took him under my umbrella, we would be safe for the time being, and I could also increase the strength of our forces. But I had a bad feeling about this. I had the feeling I was being tricked, but I didn't know exactly how. What was it? What was I overlooking?

“I am not known for my patience. Choose swiftly.”

The dragon chose that moment to pressure me. My mind spiraled faster towards chaos. Should I reject the dragon's words? But that would be the start of a desperate battle to the death. Then should I accept them? But that would be just what he wanted me to do. The same thoughts spiraled around and around inside my head. I was trapped in an endless circle.

I'd felt this somewhere before. It was my previous world. I had the feeling that I'd done something similar while huddled up in that dark room.

I let out a small groan. Memories flashed through my mind: a dark room, the light of a monitor. Myself, unable to take that step forward. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Restlessness burned my chest. Time was being frittered away. I still didn't know what I was supposed to do. I groaned. I shed tears. I was still squandering time. What could I do to find salvation? What was I supposed to choose? What was I meant to do? I didn't even know that anymore.

Someone, someone, anyone, please...

The memory of having come to an end without making a choice accelerated my panic. Something black and sticky started to crawl out of a pit deep inside my heart.

What do I do? What? What? What—

My breath became shallow. My arms and legs were cold and stiff. And yet my back was clammy with sweat. I had reached peak confusion.

That was the moment. I felt as if someone had placed one of their small hands softly on the top of my head.

My neck jerked back to look upwards. Of course, I couldn't see anything there. There was just the dark roof of the cavern. But whether it was

coincidence or inevitability, looking up made me take deeper breaths. As I breathed deeply, oxygen entered my body and raced through my blood. Refreshing air blew into my blunted mind, and as my senses began to function once again, her words came back to me.

— *The oath you made that day belongs to the two of us.*

Of course. I was already given salvation. By her. And I had sworn an oath to her, an oath that was more important to me than anything else.

— *Fear thou not, for I am with thee.*

My heart thumped loudly.

— *Be not dismayed, for I am thy god.*

My hazy thoughts started to become clear.

— *I will strengthen thee; I will help thee; I will keep thee with my flame.*

Heat once again surged into my body, which tension and confusion had made sluggish and cold. It was like a warm flame had flared to life within my chest. If the thing called courage could take a form, perhaps this was it.

“Oh...”

Sparks of insight fired inside my head. It was fascinating how fast my mind was ticking now. Logic pieced itself together.

Using his powerful presence and pressure to cause me to lose my cool and make bad decisions was all part of the strategy of Valacirca’s offer. As long as I didn’t succumb to that, the rest would be easy.

First, I turned around.

“Menel, Al, Reystov, Ghelreis.”

Menel had already nocked a mithril arrow onto his bow. He’d recovered most of them in the hall. Al also had his halberd in hand, and his stance showed he could spring into action at any time. Reystov’s hand was resting on the handle of his sword, poised to unsheathe it at lightning speed. And the sight of Ghelreis’s sturdy body and massive shield was very reassuring.

“The result of this discussion will decide everything. Be prepared.”

They all nodded, with the faces of warriors who had steeled themselves for battle. I turned back to face the dragon.

“Oh?”

Valacirca spoke in a low growl. Maybe I looked quite different to him as well now.

“So you’re decided. Then state your choice, Faraway Paladin. Peace or death?”

“I won’t be choosing anything,” I said, rebuffing the question the dragon had taken such pleasure in asking. “You’ll be the one making a choice, Valacirca.”



The foul-dragon twitched.

“Oh? And what will I be choosing?”

Before answering his question, I took a step towards him and looked up at him. The dragon which I had thought of as like a school building now looked at least a bit smaller. The size I had seen before was probably false, an illusion created in my mind by intimidation and pressure.

“Whether you will change, or not.”



I put the question to him directly. This was the first time the foul-dragon's eyes went wide.

Once I thought about it with cold logic, it was simple, really. Bringing the powerful foul-dragon under my command appeared logical at a glance, but when I thought about how someone only superficially obedient would act, it really was nothing but a fool's choice.

Say that I did bring Valacirca into my forces. What would he do after that? Obediently do what I say? Indulge himself in sleep peacefully? As if. I would kill him before long, because I saw him as a threat. So if not that, then what?

Obviously, he would be at work behind the scenes.

To raise the value of his own existence, to make sure that he wouldn't be discarded, the foul-dragon would bring wars to me, make enemies for me, and continue to create conflict. And what's more, they would be brutal, large-scale battles that required the power of a dragon. I wouldn't be able to abandon Valacirca then. And as I continued to seek the dragon's power and fight alongside him, the dragon would gradually become an emblem of vital importance. That would make it even more impossible for me to dispense with him. To ensure his safety until the day he flew away from me, he would eat away at me and the entire area around me while calling himself my subordinate.

I couldn't imagine that someone like me would be able to control the machinations of a dragon living since time immemorial. I would have to stick with the dragon, for the sake of morale as well, even while knowing he was working against me. It would be like a nasty drug.

"Let's be clear. The 'peace' you refer to is 'a restricted peace between you and me'. It's by no means 'my peace,' and it isn't 'peace for the innocent people,' either. Am I wrong?"

When he heard that question, the dragon laughed as if he found this so very entertaining.

"Kaha... khahaha... khahaha! Precisely. You are correct."

The elder dragons that had lived since the age of the gods were some of the

closest creatures to the Words of Creation. And the power of Words was weakened by lies and untruths. Although the dragon might try to trick me, if I asked him a straight question, he would never tell a lie.

“In that case, I’m certain about my condition. You must change.”

“Heheh. Change how?”

“If you will swear to change your fanatical, scheming nature of always seeking war—”

I stared straight into his golden eye.

“If you will say you truly seek my protection—”

If he could say he would live in peace—

If he could say he would no longer seek bloodshed except when necessary, and express a desire to reign in his frenzy and live with the good gods—

“Then I swear on the god of the flame that I will protect you. As long as there is life in me, I will guard you from any and all adversaries.”

It made no difference whether he was a dragon or a person. Wherever there was someone in true sorrow, I would offer them a helping hand. Wherever there was evil that would harm the innocent, I would fight them. That was what I had vowed that day to my silent, black-haired god.

“That’s the way I live my life.” I had decided that it would be. “Now choose! Will it be a change of heart, or else death?! I await your answer, dragon!” I shouted my question to him.

A cloud of heat and miasma rose up.

“Excellent!”

The first word from his mouth was praise.

“You have answered the Dragon’s Riddle well, Faraway Paladin.”

His wings spread to their full extent. He raised his chin.

“You are not a wretched savage wielding power without purpose. Neither are you a crafty coward out to save his own skin. You possess courage and wisdom and are prepared to follow the path you believe to be right!

Marvellous! You truly are the successor to those heroes who preceded you!"

The relaxed, lazy posture the dragon had shown until now was gone. He was no longer giving the slightest impression that he was treating me as a curiosity.

"I acknowledge you as a true champion."

Before me stood a great dragon as old as the gods.

"With that in mind, changing my nature is out of the question!"

The dragon roared.

"I am Valacirca! The Gods' Sickle, Calamity's Sickle! The king of poison and brimstone and brother to lava! Poison exists to kill and maim, lava exists to seethe and boil! War! Disaster! Decorations awarded! Treasure! Death! Virgin sacrifices! Heroes! What is a dragon without these?!"

The god of undeath, Stagnate, had referred to the foul-dragon Valacirca as worldly and materialistic. I did think that description was fitting. He had worldly attachments, and what's more, the things to which he was attached—money, conflict, safety, sleep—all seemed to be what could be called basic needs. However, there was a true nature behind that.

"I am Valacirca! The strongest and oldest dragon, feared even by the gods!"

It was to stay true to himself as a dragon, to keep on living his life as a dragon with burning intensity. These were the out-of-place thoughts going through my head as the dragon roared at me loudly enough to make my skin tremble.

"Hero, and the warriors who follow you: It will please me to bury you here, and append another page to my chronicle of terror. And it will please me to be slain here, and be spoken of in tales of valor across the four corners of the world."

His fangs snapped and clicked. The enormous mass of tough muscle before me began to move. Negotiations had broken down. The dragon had refused to reform. The only way forwards now was battle.

"Now, if you are prepared to be incinerated to your souls by dragonflame and vanish completely from the eternal cycle, you have my permission! Test yourselves against me!"

Amid all this, for some reason, I was a little bit excited.

Dragon slaying. Charging at a fearsome dragon, relying only on the steel in your very own hand. *Dragon slaying!* It wasn't in my nature to romanticize battle as much as Blood; at least, I thought it wasn't. But this situation had some kind of irresistible draw to it. Valacirca was an opponent who was unquestionably deserving of my respect, and he was going to be the strongest enemy I'd faced so far. He was worth challenging. He was worth fighting!

"I am the Faraway Paladin, William G. Maryblood! Have at you!"

Naming myself like a knight in an old chivalric romance, I charged at the foul-dragon as old as the gods.



In the dim light of the Great Cavern, Valacirca swung his claws at me.

"Kah!!"

"Acceleratio!"

With a Word, I accelerated straight towards the foul-dragon. I ducked his sword-like claws and his fingers which were each as thick as a human's torso, and pressed forwards towards him. A low sound accompanied his tree trunk-like arm swinging above my head. That one attack could have taken my head off.

The stereotype of large creatures being sluggish is a falsehood. Large creatures are strong and fast just by virtue of their size. The length of each of their steps is on a different level, and each swipe of their arms covers an entirely different range. The same goes for their ability to withstand attacks. Being stabbed with a thumbtack would probably be a fatal wound to an ant, but do the same to an elephant and the tack would be unlikely to even break the skin.

In that sense, Valacirca was simply strong. When it came down to it, he was hopelessly physically strong. And I was well aware of it.

"Lamina!"

Leaping in close, I extended a blade of mana beyond Pale Moon's physical

blade and thrust it towards what appeared to be an old wound on his side. However, the dragon twisted, and my blade met resistance, blocked by the dragon's scales.

Dragonscale...

— If you're going to fight him, I'd focus on his old wounds. A dragon's scales are tough. I'll tell you now, I doubt even Blood could have cut to the skin through dragonscale.

Gus's words came back to me. Cutting through dragonscale would have been difficult even for Blood. But I wasn't just going to follow in Blood's footsteps forever!

I took a quick breath and roared. I made the muscles throughout my body work in concert, transferring force from my feet to my knees, then my thighs, twisting my body at the hips to transfer force to my shoulders, my arms, my wrists. Summoning every last bit of force as expertly as I could, I pushed my obstructed blade in harder.

"Gnng?!"

Valacirca groaned. I felt the unmistakable sensation of the blade piercing the dragon's massive, tough scales. I kept going.

"Acceleratio!"

A roar of surprise accompanied an arm lashing fiercely out at me. I avoided the strike as I accelerated with Pale Moon still embedded in the dragon's skin. Clutching my spear tightly with my whole arm, I ran alongside Valacirca, using my blade of mana to slice a horizontal wound into the dragon's side. From there, I headed straight for a small gap between the rows of giant furnaces, hoping to escape, but Valacirca was not one to miss that.

"Hng... Hahaha... So you strike through the defense of dragonscale! Perfect, bracing stimulation!"

Behind me, I heard him roar out and then draw in a large breath. He was surely about to unleash scorching miasmic dragonbreath. I was protected by several layers of magic and miracles, but if his breath hit me directly, it wouldn't be surprising if I was burned beyond recognition or even melted. My heart

leaped in panic. However, the lethal breath was never to touch my back.

“You’re not only up against Will!”

“Shh!”

Even without looking, I could tell it was Menel and Reystov. While I was charging in from the front, they had already spread out and made their way around to his left and right sides. The two of them were skilled enough to inflict serious wounds on the dragon.

Menel’s Silver-string produced several elegant notes. The radiance of mithril arrows cut through the darkness of the Great Cavern. Reystov’s nameless sword glinted as he drew it and slashed in a single lightning-speed motion. Engraved with Gus’s Signs, the sword’s slash extended like a twisting snake, closing in on the dragon.

Menel’s target was Valacirca’s golden eye, while Reystov had aimed at the toes on the foot Valacirca was putting his weight on. The arrow carried enough force to shoot through an eyeball, and the slash had the sharpness to chop off toes. Even an ancient foul-dragon like Valacirca couldn’t ignore them.

“Tch!”

He was forced to twist his neck and pull back his leg to dodge. With his posture disrupted, he couldn’t hold the aim he had before. I reached the gap between the furnaces and spun around. As the dragon swung its neck, breathing in random directions, I blocked the heatwave with my large shield.

The heatwave from his breath, thick like black smoke, held more than enough heat to roast a human whole. But with the defensive magic and the many blessings that were placed on my entire body, as well as my magic shield engraved with Signs to protect against heat and poison, I endured.

This was *just the heatwave*. If his breath engulfed me directly, instant death would be putting it lightly. When Valacirca said that my soul itself would be incinerated and I would vanish from the eternal cycle, he might have been telling the truth.

“Impressive teamwork... haven’t you?!”

With an effortless swing of his arm, Valacirca clawed huge chunks out of the stone floor, transferring momentum to countless stone pellets that were sent scattering towards Reystov. But Ghelreis's Sword-smasher shield and armor knocked them out of the air. Valacirca didn't care. He swung again. But this time, out of nowhere, an old wooden tower platform that had been built inside the Great Cavern came toppling down.

“...?!”

It was Al. With his Immense halberd, he had smashed the platform's seemingly fragile supports, sending it toppling onto the dragon. Valacirca knocked it away, but broken pieces of wood fell everywhere and obstructed his vision.

It has to be now, I thought. I couldn't see a long battle being anything but a disadvantage for us.

It was difficult to imagine a mythological dragon running out of stamina. It was probably best to treat Valacirca as having inexhaustible energy. The same went for his ability to withstand our attacks. He could probably comfortably withstand as many as we could deal him. That was why right this moment, he was enjoying the fight and testing us out instead of going on a serious rampage against us.

We, on the other hand, would be finished for good if even one of Valacirca's attacks landed a direct hit. He would still have plenty of opportunities to attack no matter how many hits he took, whereas we would be done for if we took so much as one serious blow. I'd known this before I took him on, but just knowing it didn't make these conditions any less ridiculously one-sided.

If we attempted to win in a straightforward confrontation, it would call for a strategy of offense and defense similar to passing through the eye of a needle. We would have to make it succeed over and over. Then Valacirca would finally get serious, and we would have to repeat that feat at an even higher difficulty, at which point perhaps we could catch a glimpse of victory over the horizon.

It wasn't a matter of it being difficult. It would be *impossible*. Our stamina wouldn't last. Our concentration wouldn't hold up. Even if we used up our entire lives' supply of luck in a single fight, it still wouldn't be enough. So I had

to bet on this right now.

I rested my spear and shield against a furnace and spread my arms wide.

“Ligatur, nodus, obligatio...”

A colossal amount of mana converged and darted at high speed. My Words, incanted quickly and with extreme precision, flew at Valacirca like shooting stars.

“...conciliat, sequitur!!”

While the dragon’s vision was obscured by the collapse of the platform, I bound him in chains of mana that formed a multilayered magical seal.

“Vastare!”

The dragon immediately fired off the Word of Destruction. At the moment his vortex of devastation was just about to wrench apart the chains, I finished my response. The Word meaning “guardianship” drawn by my right hand obstructed the vortex. The Word meaning “erasure” drawn by my left hand wiped it out.

“...?!”

Triple casting. It was Gus’s specialty, and a technique that I had been practicing constantly. This particular combination was the most hidden of hidden techniques, burned into my eyes on the day I saw that battle between Gus and the god of undeath’s Echo.

“Pallida mors aequo pulsat pede...”

With my arms spread wide, I visualized myself scooping in the enormous amount of circulating mana and gathered it at a single point. And all the while, I weaved fluent Words and scribed fluid Signs.

“You would cast *that* in a real battle?!”

“...pauperum tabernas...”

I ignored the dragon’s roars. In an almost trance-like state of extreme concentration, I made fine adjustments to the mana and carried out the ritual movements in an abbreviated form.

“...regumque turres!”

“■■■■!”

For the first time, Valacirca cut the idle chatter. In a rasping kind of voice unique to dragons, he started reciting some kind of Word at a furious pace. But it was too late now. This was a ritual spell intended to be cast by a team of several people working in tandem. It was one of the ultimate magics, which was virtually impossible to perform on your own.

“Damnatio memoriae!”

It was a colorless, invisible pulse of destruction. As it traveled, it tore to shreds the connections between all of Creation’s Words, breaking them apart and isolating them. The body, the soul, the phenomenon—it rendered them all meaningless and returned them to mana.

The acme of destruction through Words, the devastating pulse of the Word of Entity Obliteration slammed into Valacirca.



A crater was gouged out of the floor, as though a humongous creature had taken a full bite out of it. Strong winds blew about the Great Cavern, as if to fill in the blank formed by the pulse that had wiped everything from existence. The dragon was nowhere to be seen. It had... looked as though the pulse had engulfed and annihilated him...

“Did we... do it?” Al said while looking all around the cavern.

“Seems kinda like it,” Menel said cautiously.

Ghelreis agreed. “Victory sometimes comes with unexpected ease.”

Reystov cast his gaze carefully around the cavern and eventually nodded too, the hem of his cloak flapping in the raging winds.

The dragon had been annihilated. Thanks to an opening created by Al, his very existence had been wiped out with the ultimate destructive magic before he ever took us seriously.

And yet, somehow, I couldn’t convince myself we’d won. Was it because it had been so sudden, so anticlimactic? Not every encounter ended with a high-

stakes, intense battle to the death. Sometimes you could be stabbed without a fight by someone who should have been below your level, and conversely, sometimes you could be facing someone better than you and have a fluke drop a cheap win into your lap. I knew all that, and yet for some reason it still didn't feel real. Had we really won? This victory had fallen into our laps so easily that it still didn't seem to have sunk in for any of us.

We stood there feeling strangely empty as the wind blew between us, howling.

The wind was... howling?

The moment I realized, an extreme chill ran down my spine. I immediately guarded with my spear and large shield as I shouted.

"No! He's still—"

But it was too late. Four bodies sprayed blood. At the same time, a violent impact slammed my shield. I was sent flying backwards. I rolled and bounced across the rubble-covered ground.

The wind *had claws*. It was a nonsensical description, but there was no other way to describe it. The wind blowing about had changed for an instant into sharp claws.

Suddenly, an old story I'd heard from Gus when I was a child crossed my mind. It was the story of a sorcerer who transfigured himself into an animal, took on the animal's thought processes perfectly, and ended up as nothing more than a wild beast.

"Trans...formed?" I mumbled, stunned.

"Ghaha... Precisely."

The wicked wind that had sucked four people's blood swirled inward, and the shape of a dragon once again formed in the crater.

Metamorphose...

Just as the name suggested, it was transfiguration magic. However, this was an extremely risky Word beyond a human's ability to control. Anything more than changing into a different person with a similar body shape was very

dangerous. Just spending a short amount of time transfigured into an animal, even one with similar body mass, could result in your mind being held back by the animal, preventing you from returning. And transforming into something inanimate with completely different mass? That required you to prepare yourself for the possibility you would never be human again. Using it that way was equivalent to taking a revolver loaded with a few randomly positioned bullets, putting it to your temple, and pulling the trigger. The circumstances would have to be very extreme to even consider it.

But now that I thought about it, how had Valacirca even *entered this underground kingdom* with a body of his size in the first place?

“So you realized. Yes!”

The foul-dragon laughed. It was howling laughter, as if he couldn’t contain his amusement.

“We are close in nature to the Words.”

The elder dragons were denizens of myth, the closest beings to the Words of Creation.

“Yes, the Word of Entity Obliteration probably would eradicate even me.”

His golden eye pierced me. Scorching breath flowed slowly from his powerful jaws.

“If you could hit me with it, of course.”

He had completely predicted the Word of Entity Obliteration’s trajectory. Not only had he predicted it, he was well aware that strong winds kicked up afterwards and had used the Word of Metamorphosis to transform into wind to make it look like he’d been annihilated. He had disguised himself among the raging winds that followed the blast and struck everyone down with his claws.

He was well versed in how to counter even the strongest destructive magic. No, not just destructive magic; I was sure that whatever other Word I had chosen, the result would have been the same. This dragon had fought on all battlefields and battled against all Words, including all those Words and Signs that were lost to the past. He was familiar with them all, and he had conquered each.

So this was a dragon. This was a foul-dragon as old as the gods.

A cold, clammy sensation spread through the core of my being.

I knew this feeling well.

Its name was despair.



The foul-dragon calmly drew himself up. He had a slight cut on his side, nothing more.

“Now...”

We were at an overwhelming disadvantage. I tightened my grip on Pale Moon’s shaft. I thought despair would swallow me if I didn’t.

“Faraway Paladin, you fought admirably and with bravery.”

Surprisingly, Valacirca hadn’t tried to kill me right away. But I had too much on my mind to consider a response. I glanced around. The others didn’t seem to be dead yet. Wait, how was that possible? It was a complete surprise attack with the striking power of a dragon and he’d failed to kill any of us? That was impossible. He had chosen not to kill them. Which had to mean...

“In light of you fighting so hard, I will make you an offer. What do you think of becoming my servants?”

It was just as I thought.

“I see you understand. I have provided you an excuse.”

Valacirca smiled. He looked as though he was enjoying this, and in fact, he probably was.

“If you turn me down, I will burn your allies to cinders. Bones, souls, and all. There. Now that your allies’ lives are in need of protection, you have a noble justification to submit to me.”

I couldn’t cover everyone at the same time. They had collapsed in different places, Menel and Al on the left and Reystov and Ghelreis on the right. In the first place, I had no more plays to use against this dragon, no more ways to bring a quick end to this battle.

“I have seen many with eyes like yours. You will not be swayed or intimidated just because I threaten to incinerate you. Even now, you are stubbornly searching for a way to cut through this situation.”

He was right. Even at this moment, I was silently holding off on answering while my mind worked desperately to come up with some kind of an out.

“But you have nothing. Am I right? Even with time to analyze the situation.”

I had to admit that it was just as the foul-dragon said. I had no more convenient breakthrough ideas.

“Oh... no, not exactly nothing. You do have one move, one way not to yield to me.”

His words caused me to frown. A move? I still had a move, in this situation?

“You can kill yourself.”

The idea had never even occurred to me.

“You are adored by the goddess of flux, are you not? All you need to do is cut off your own head.”

There was no hint of laughter in Valacirca’s voice.

“There will be a next world, won’t there? And one after that. And one after that. As many as you please. If you think winning is impossible, toss out the game board and hang yourself. If you want to reject tragedy, simply say, ‘Not yet. There will be a next world. This isn’t where I’m meant to fight,’ and drive a dagger into your own chest.”

His words were a hideous caricature of the truth. Everyone knows that things can’t actually be simplified that way. But that probably wasn’t the dragon’s point.

I shook my head. “I won’t take that choice.”

“Good. If you saw that little value in your own life, you wouldn’t even be worth subjugating.”

To Valacirca, who had an attachment to this world and had lived in it since the age of the gods, whether or not I had the will to make the most of my own life

was a crucial point he couldn't budge on.

"Then choose. Join me, or resist and be eradicated."

My allies had been severely wounded to the point that they couldn't do anything to help. I myself wasn't uninjured, and my game-winning moves had already failed. I didn't even know how many thousands of successful attacks would be needed to win by ordinary methods. I was completely checkmated. The situation now was even more desperate than it had been in my battle against the god of undeath. However—

"If I join you, I can easily imagine how you'll use me."

"I imagine so."

He would spread war, stir up chaos, and continue to create the kinds of situations that a dragon preferred. My dialogue with him so far had told me loud and clear that he couldn't live any other way.

"Then I can't go along with you."

"Your allies will die."

"That isn't how I see it."

Valacirca tilted his head.

"How do you see it?"

"We came resolved. No matter how many of us we lose, as long as just one of us can stick our blade into your throat, we'll have achieved our goal."

We were warriors. Throwing away the opportunity to win the battle in order to protect an ally wasn't what any of us wanted.

"But you no longer have any prospect of victory."

"I do." I steeled myself and looked up at Valacirca. "If I drive this blade into you thousands or maybe millions of times, I will win. Am I wrong?"

My response seemed to take Valacirca off guard. His eyes went wide. Then he chuckled, amused.

"A prospect that lies at the far end of thousands of miracles."

“Thousands, millions, billions, I don’t care. If there’s a chance of victory, a possibility of fulfilling my oath, then that’s what I’m going to bet on.”

That was the path I had chosen.

— *So when you get hit, put up with it and move in. You’re dead if you step back anyway, so you go for broke. You keep your attacks coming, and bury your sword or spear or fist, whatever you’ve got, in there over and over.*

That was one of the fundamentals of battle I had learned from Blood. When you’re hurt, move in. Step forward and give back what you were given.

“You’re about to find out how stubborn I can be.”

I probably couldn’t win. I was probably going to die. But I forced a fierce grin onto my face. The foul-dragon followed suit, baring his fangs.

“Foul-dragon Valacirca...”

“Faraway Paladin...”

Gripping my familiar spear, I assumed a battle stance.

“I will slay you!”

“You will die trying!”

I ran ahead towards my final battle.



The period that followed felt like being caught up in a flood and swimming as hard as I could to save myself from drowning.

During the battle’s opening stages, I used all the Words and tactics I could to move us away from the place where Menel and the others had collapsed. It was possible they would still die in the heatwave, but I wanted to do as much as I could for them. If Valacirca had stubbornly resisted, it would probably have been impossible to move battlegrounds, but the dragon didn’t do that. Perhaps he’d decided it wasn’t worth concerning himself with defeated foes, or perhaps he was arranging things to make it easier for me as his enemy to give him my all.

I sprinted. Attacks flew at me from his sharp claws, thick tail, trampling feet,

and at times body slams and deadly breath. I accelerated and dodged, hitting him with both Words and my spear with carefully judged timing. The dragon, speaking in a raspy voice, hammered me with many brutal Words, including several I had never even heard of. I summoned all of my knowledge and all the Words I could muster to counter them. Sometimes, he howled at me with an intensity that shook the mountain.

I stacked blessing upon blessing to protect myself from ruptured eardrums and the grip of fear. Several times, I was late to react and got injured by flying stones and the heatwave from his breath. Each time, I healed myself with a blessing and got back to my feet. I avoided immediate death by inches several times. My large shield had long been buckled and broken. I gave a long and frenzied scream as I continued fighting, covered in my own blood.

Claws came from the right. I dodged. Spear punch. Through the scale. Now a stomp. I pressed forward and sideways. Ducked and covered. Word, response, negation. Claws swung. Tail swung. I dodged. Spear—

“GRAH!!”

The red insides of his mouth closed in, fangs bared. Valacirca had used a bite for the first time. My body had gotten used to the cycle of claws, tail, stomp, and couldn't react immediately. But I reacted still, although a little late, forcibly shielding my body with Pale Moon. I was knocked flying, the dragon's fangs just grazing me. I stood up again, went to hold my spear at the ready, and realized that it felt strangely light. My breath caught at the back of my throat. Pale Moon was broken. My favorite weapon, which I'd been using for so long—its shaft was bent, its blade shattered; no one could fix it now.

In an attempt to fire up the fighting spirit that had broken along with my spear, I yelled another mad war cry and pulled out Overeater. Valacirca had several wounds across his body. If I could drive it into him and recover my energy, I'd still have—

“I'm afraid—”

The moment I stepped forward, my foot was blown off. I yelled out in pain. Several destructive Signs had been engraved into the ground on the spot where I had placed my foot. When had he set those up? Sometime during this battle?

Sometime before?

“I know that demonblade.”

Of course. Valacirca had been part of the High King’s forces.

“It is a fearsome blade, isn’t it? It has an interesting history. It was tempered by a King-ranked demon to face off against and kill the High King, who was always crazy for swords. But once you know the trick, there are ways to defeat it. For example...”

Even as I withstood the intense pain to pray and heal my foot, many flame arrows floated around the foul-dragon. He spread his wings with a heavy flap and distanced himself far from me. Apparently, he didn’t even intend to entertain close-range battles anymore. From his posture, I could tell he was planning to finish me off with breath and long-range Words.

“Though I was toying with you, I never expected a mere human to cause me so much trouble. Faraway Paladin, William G. Maryblood, I shall praise you for inflicting so many wounds upon me.”

My mind was hazy. I couldn’t focus.

“If this had been a test of each other’s skills, I may have handed you the garland of victory and commended you on a battle well fought. Your power is no less than the heroes of the age of the gods. You are truly powerful, a champion of the modern age.”

The strength had left my arms. My voice shook, and I couldn’t utter Words properly. The dragon was as alive as ever.

“But this is a battle to the death.”

The dragon headed towards me to take my life. I had to defeat the dragon. I’d promised my god. I had to fight.

I summoned the last reserves of my strength, using my sword to help me stand. I started gathering mana. I desperately focused my concentration, healing my wounds as if it would make a difference.

“I will not make you suffer. Die.”

The dragon inhaled, then unleashed hellish breath that would surely

incinerate me to nothing.

It was hopeless. There was nothing I could do about this.

Even as those thoughts went through my head, I somehow held up my sword and tried to utter a Word. I had been given life. I had to live it until the end. That was my thinking.

The scorching miasmic breath engulfed me. But the end never came.



“Oh...”

I realized that a warm flame was floating in front of me. Around the flame, a transparent barrier of some kind was being generated.

“God...?”

It was as if it was protecting me from the dragon’s breath.

“A Herald? Heh. Not enough power to manifest an Echo? Goddess of the flame, you waste your time.”

Dragonbreath struck the barrier. It struck it over and over. The flame wavered. Fissures ran along the barrier. But still she protected me.

“Are you that keen to keep your hero? But support from the Herald of a single god will change nothing.”

Against the violence of a dragon, even that was nothing more than a play for time. But still she didn’t give up. She kept on blocking the dragonbreath, over and over.

— I will strengthen thee; I will help thee; I will keep thee with my flame.

I understood. She was trying to keep her promise.

“God...”

The flame said nothing. As always, she remained silent and simply continued to protect me. But like all things, that too had to come to an end.

“■■■■!”

The dragon spoke a raspy Word. An unknown pulse burst towards us, and the

barrier shattered without a trace. Already, the foul-dragon had enough breath stored in his mouth to kill me.

“Paladin! You were a foe well deserved of my breath! I will burn your figure into my memory, and your soul and bones from the face of existence!”

This roar of Valacirca’s resounded around the Great Cavern. It was probably his way of offering me a final tribute.

“I’m afraid I have an issue with that.”

A new voice with an easygoing attitude suddenly came from the side.

“What?!”

The dragon immediately breathed in that direction, but the owner of the voice took an incredible arc through the air and evaded it.

“This hero is my catch, my foe, and I do not appreciate him being taken.”

With wings blacker than the night and ominously shining red eyes, the thing gliding back down towards me was—

“Stagnate, god of undeath?!”

The foul-dragon groaned.



Valacirca couldn’t hide his surprise. Beside me, the god of undeath faced the foul-dragon and spoke volubly.

“So let me see, foul-dragon Valacirca. You said that support from the Herald of a single god will change nothing. Hahah. Precisely! I myself predicted as much. These heroes are insufficient; they and the god of the flame, still insufficient! I said that killing the wicked Calamity’s Sickle was beyond them! However—”

The Herald-raven clicked its beak. It sounded like he was taking great pleasure in this.

“Come to think of it, I never considered what might happen if two gods were present. I wonder? Perhaps these heroes would stand a chance of victory? Personally, I have a feeling that they might, but what say you,

Valacirca?"

"You're as talkative as ever, god of undeath."

"Why is it that we don't get along, Valacirca? You and I are cut from the same cloth. I'd say we share similar pleasures."

"Mine are nothing as distasteful as yours. My life and soul exist to incinerate and shine with glory. What good is it to make things last forever? Materialist."

"That is what I call distasteful. Beauty should be preserved forever. It's a natural emotion. Vandal."

Valacirca looked displeased. I couldn't blame him; Stagnate had spoiled his battle.

"And aren't you a charmer, Paladin? To have not just one goddess but two come running to your aid! That was virtually unheard of even in the age of the gods."

Valacirca sent me a sarcastic glare. But more importantly, I got the feeling that some kind of shocking truth had just been revealed to me. Two? *Goddesses?*

"Does it matter whether I present myself as a god or a goddess? To gods, gender is mere outward decoration. Right?"

The raven seemed to shrug. Then, stopping on my shoulder, it tried to rub its head against my cheek. God's flame rushed in to obstruct him. A silent face-off was underway near my shoulder.

"Hahaha. No need to get so angry, Gracefeel. I am offering to lend you a hand. Surely I can be allowed one or two perks. Hm? Judging by your reaction, you want to know 'why now.' You know, I had planned to stay out of this. But after seeing such a rousing battle, I feel I will regret not offering any support."

"You would stick your beak into my battle for that? You hero-crazy hedonist."

Valacirca spat the words at him.

"Precisely! This hero, this meddlesome paladin, is worth going crazy for!"

Stagnate answered loud and bold.

“Now! The battle is far from over! Do you have the will to continue fighting, William G. Maryblood?! Paladin of the flame, my wise and foolish foe! You once said you would keep to your oath, keep faith in your heart, and keep on fighting until the very instant you fell over dead. Do not tell me those words were false!”

I snorted. I was a total wreck. My arms and legs had been torn off and healed with benediction more times than I could count. My stamina and concentration were both exhausted, and my spear was broken, too. The only reason I was standing was because I had my sword to lean on. Honestly, I was at my limit. I wanted to let my consciousness go, drop everything, and sleep. But even so...

Even so, if Stagnate was going to say that to me, if Gracefeel was going to stay by my side—

“I guess I have no choice.” On wobbly legs, I stood ready for battle and fixed my gaze on the dragon. “Valacirca.”

“What?”

I smiled at him. “Didn’t I tell you I’d be stubborn?”

“Hahahah. Yes, you did. Horribly stubborn. Your stubbornness has even driven the gods to action. How heroic.”

The dragon grinned.

“Very well. A human is only a dragon’s equal with the full protection and blessing of a god. And dragons exist to reduce those god-praised heroes to ashes!”

Valacirca spread his wings. He was as healthy as ever. I had dealt him several wounds and ripped off several of his scales, but nothing more than that.

“Compassionate goddesses who rule over souls! Graceful maidens without battle blessings! Tell me! What protection will you provide this hero, and how will you kill me?!”

Defiantly, Valacirca stood tall, as if daring them to try him.

The fact was that neither the god of the flame nor the god of undeath was a

god of war. The god of the flame clearly didn't have that kind of nature, and having actually fought once against the god of undeath, I knew that he—or she—had essentially no knowledge of the martial arts. Valacirca was right. Both of them were fundamentally merciful gods. Even if the god of undeath gave me her protection as well, I had my doubts whether my blade would ever—

“Hm? I won't provide him anything.”

The god of undeath said flatly.

“This man is my adversary. He has declared that he will remain as such. I certainly have no reason to give him a blessing.”

“Oh?”

“However, Valacirca, I suspect you are forgetting... *where we are.*”

When he heard those words, the dragon's eyes widened. Of course. How could I forget?! This place was—

“This is the Iron Country! The mountain where brave warriors of fire linger in regret of falling to an army of demons and a foul-dragon!”

An enormous burst of power exploded from the god of undeath's Herald-raven. The power spread outward like an invisible wave, reaching all parts of the mountain.

“Now return! Your allies and descendants have come back to you, and with them stands an unmistakable hero! They have returned to defeat the demons, take on the dragon, and reclaim the mountains that are your home!”

I could hear the sound of boots, countless boots.

“Slumbering lost, he is no warrior who would stand by now! I call upon you to take up the sword of revenge and bury your regrets! Feed the fire of courage once again!”

I could hear the sound of armor, of axes drumming against shields, of booming voices that shook the ground.

“Warriors of the dwarves!!”

An army of pale blue specters poured out of a great many entrances into the

Great Cavern. The dead dwarven warriors roared, to take back their homeland and take on the dragon once again.



The god of undeath's Herald-raven flew through the Great Cavern like a guide. War horns blew loudly, signaling the march to the field of battle. I could feel the regular pounding of their war drums in my stomach like a heartbeat. The flames of pale blue souls danced. I could hear hundreds or thousands of people marching in step. The dragon watched this quietly with scrunched-up eyes, perhaps intrigued, or perhaps nostalgic.

As I watched all this, I heard footsteps behind me. There were four sets. "You guys... aren't undead, are you?" I turned around as I said it. I knew from their aura that they weren't, but I couldn't help myself.

"Chill. We're alive."

"Yes. See?"

"Close shave, though."

Menel and Al were there, and so were Reystov and Ghelreis.

"Your solo heroics pulled the dragon's attention off us."

"Then, with the blessing of our divine creator—although, the young master was unfamiliar with it, so it took time for us to be healed, of course."

Now I understood why Al's blade had become enshrouded in divine fire when he fought that demon. He had gained the protection of Blaze. That meant that just like me—well, perhaps not quite like me, but given time, at least, he could heal his own wounds and stand back up. Me not giving up had meant something. The god of undeath had taken action for me. My allies had once again stood up for me. Knowing that, I could keep on fighting.

"William... Sir William. This is, this is..."

Ghelreis stared at the army before him with a stunned expression. It looked like he couldn't decide whether to believe what he was seeing.

"They're going to fight with us for now. They'll be valuable reinforcements."

“Ohhh...” Tears rolled down his cheeks.

He had once dreamed of this field of battle and never been able to obtain it, and now he had finally arrived. Just then, I heard more footsteps. These were heavy. Clad in brilliant mithril armor, but with a slim, gentle appearance, the ghost of a single dwarf walked towards us. In his hand, he held a gleaming, golden sword. Ghelreis gasped and dropped to one knee as if on reflex. That gesture told me everything.

“Grandfather?” Al said in shock.

The last lord of the Iron Country, Lord Aurvangr, was there. He wordlessly stroked Al’s hair as if to say ‘well done.’ Al’s face crumpled, and tears brimmed in his eyes.

Then, Lord Aurvangr turned his gaze to me. Still saying nothing, he held the blade of his golden sword in his gloved hand and presented me the hilt.

“Huh?”

Um. To me? Shouldn’t you be giving that to Al? Those thoughts and doubts did pass through my mind, but his strong gaze won out. I gripped the hilt and received the sword.

It was Calldawn, the famous sword that had claimed one of Valacirca’s eyes. It was an enchanted sword that had been handed down through generations of dwarves and had probably existed since the time of the gods.

“Hero of the flame. Please... look after my grandson... and... this mountain...”

His voice came out hoarse and raw. Then, the armor being worn by Lord Aurvangr’s ghost, and his flesh too, slowly started to break down.

“Grandfather? Oh no... Grandfather?!”

Of course. I’d been told. *Valacirca’s flame could incinerate even souls.* Lord Aurvangr’s soul had most likely been roasted by the dragon. Its shape had probably become unstable a long time ago. It was probably reaching its limits just holding together for this long.

Tragically, heartlessly, the specter slowly melted and broke down, until...

“Not yet.”

A soft voice and a power as gentle as the breeze stopped the collapse.

“Not yet.”

It was my god. The Herald-flame of Gracefeel, goddess of the flame, had spoken.



“Hearken, ye that cannot retain your souls.”

My god’s words were not only directed at Lord Aurvangr. I looked and saw that several hundred of the dwarves in that army were in a similar condition. As they roasted, melted, and their spectral bodies started to break down, the warriors still kept their will to fight; yet even that seemed more than they could hope for.

“All ye that are burned by the breath of the dragon and can no more return to samsara.”

She seemed to speak calmly, but there was a certain sorrowful quality to her voice. And then—

“O ye that are born in this world and lived well! O ye that endured!”

My god, who had always spoken with few words and a level tone, shouted loud for the first time. Her words were filled with unmistakable praise for the lives they had led. They were words of gentle appreciation, praise, celebration, and direct justification.

Though they were ghosts, some of the dwarves trembled or broke down crying. To have one’s way of life validated by a god—could there be any greater honor, as a person or a warrior?

“I shall bestow upon you a final blessing! If even in death, after your souls have perished, you yet desire to bring forth good and righteousness—”

The flame danced in the air. It was beautiful and yet frail, like a firefly dancing through the night sky.

“I shall guide you! Gather unto the heroes that live in this time!”

The divine flame danced. It was the souls’ guiding lantern, preserving them

before they came apart and beckoning soul after soul to our side. One after another, they came flying towards me and the others. I braced, but there was no impact or pain. However, their feelings came through to me. I felt their regrets, their lamentations, their unfinished business; and I understood their fervent desire for the victory they had been unable to achieve.

Come with us, they said. Please, let us go together. Fight alongside us.

As their words echoed inside my heart, mysteriously, power seemed to well up within me. The exhaustion weighing down my entire body like a lead weight began to vanish. My hazy mind became refreshingly clear. I felt as if I could immediately sprint into action.

Everything looked so clear to me now. These warriors' souls, left to roam around the mountains that had been brought to ruin by the dragon, had almost been lost. But now, they were giving me power. I could tell without being told that their souls had been passed on to us.

Menel, Reystov, and Ghelreis also accepted those souls with somber expressions. And once he had confirmed that all of the burned souls had gathered with us, the soul of Lord Aurvangr, which was close to breaking apart, extended a hand towards Al. Al took it.

"Grandfather..."

"I will not say I'm sorry. My grandson, please, bring life back to this country and its people."

"I know. Please leave it to me!"

The two of them looked at one another. Then, the soul of Lord Aurvangr scattered into golden particles and disappeared into Al's chest. The god of undeath's Herald muttered:

"What a pity. It seems I must share the fun."

Then the foul-dragon gave a pensive growl and spoke sedately.

"It looks like you're ready, Faraway Paladin."

Even as the situation unfolded like this, Valacirca still didn't start attacking us in haste. He waited calmly for us to completely finish.

“I... guess you didn’t do that out of kindness.”

“Khahaha. Of course not.”

The injured dragon spread his wings and drew himself tall.

“It is much like aging alcohol. Before I crush the heroes, I wait for them finish all their preparations, get everything in order, fill themselves to the brim with hope, and march towards me. The moment when their faces warp in despair...”

He bared his fangs.

“...is my greatest pleasure.”

There was no hint of a lie in Valacirca’s words. He probably *had* seen off more heroes than he could count that way, and incinerated them down to their souls.

“Now challenge me if you dare, Faraway Paladin. Either I will bury you here, and another page will be added to my chronicle of terror, or you will slay me here, and I will be spoken of in tales of valor across the four corners of the world.”

The dragon’s whole body brimmed over with miasma.

“Now is the moment of truth.”

I couldn’t answer him straight away. I looked at my god.

“Here I go.”

“Yes. I command thee again.”

The Herald-flame of the goddess flared up with an unmissable flash of brilliant light. And she, Gracefeel, goddess of flux, gave me my order in a solemn voice.

“Go, my knight. Slay the dragon, and pay that which you have vowed.”

I looked about at my allies and the ranks of dwarven ghosts.

“I swear on this sword, on the flame, on all the souls of warriors that dwell within me!”

I lifted the golden sword high, raised my voice, and shouted at the top of my lungs.

“The evil dragon shall be slain!!”

In response, a battle cry of hundreds shook the mountain.

“Roar, fire of courage!”

“Our enemy, this is the end of your evil!”

“The time for retribution has come! The hour of justice is at hand!”

“Bellator! Bellator!”

“Fortis Fortuna adiuvat!”

As if in reply to the countless shouts shaking the earth, the foul-dragon howled. The final battle began.



“RRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAA!!”

The dragon’s roar shook the Great Cavern. It was a terrifying, draconic howl, which without serious preparation would be enough on its own to wear down your soul and leave your mind vacant. He lashed out with his claws at the same time. Screaming out loud, I swung my sword in a horizontal arc, knocking his attack off course, and I stepped in close.

“Sagitta Flammeum!”

“Flame, protect me!”

The dragon’s Word and my Sacred Shield blessing collided and wore away at each other. With a bright flash, both were dispelled.

My entire body was full of energy as I moved. Fervent heat filled my chest. Crystal-clear consciousness extended to every part of my body. I felt as though I had perfect control over everything down to the finest movements of my fingertips. I could anticipate and follow the enormous masses that were the dragon’s arms and legs even without looking as they assailed me from above.

I dodged his claws, pierced his scales, got behind him, cut him open. The blade of the enchanted sword Calldawn vibrated, producing a wondrously clear tone. No matter how many of the dragon’s scales I cut off, the sword remained unscratched and unblemished. It didn’t seem that even the slightest speck of

blood had marred the blade. I was keeping Overeater sheathed for now, but Calldawn might have been just as sharp, perhaps even sharper.

Valacirca gave an angered roar, but he still made no attempt to avoid a close-quarters battle. He swiped at me aggressively with his claws, trying to crush me with them. Now that an army of this size had appeared with me as their standard-bearer, he must have decided that it was better to suffer a few flesh wounds to eradicate me quickly than take it easy from afar.

He committed to each decision and never hesitated. His arms, which reminded me of the trunks of enormous trees, gouged through the air with a mighty sound, swinging first left then right. My tension high, I dodged those swipes and saw my timing to draw in close again, but before I could—

“■■■—!”

The unfamiliar Word spoken by the dragon coincided with my field of vision lurching to a horrible angle. Sludge had spurted out of the supposedly solid ground, and my right foot had sunk into the soil.

Panic struck. From my previous world’s knowledge, I recognized this as liquefaction, but I couldn’t come up with a Word to counter it on the spot. This Word hadn’t been passed down into the modern age. It was a Lost Word, forgotten since the age of the gods.

I had no way of responding. I had no idea what would even work. I couldn’t speak a Word on reflex, and I had no time to think!

“Now crush!!”

In that moment of hesitation, a palm the size of a large table, with fingers like human torsos and sword-like claws, came tearing down towards me. The strike had the dragon’s whole body weight behind it. If I took it directly, there was no way I’d be able to endure it. Even if I resisted it a little, I would be completely crushed. My leg was caught and I was in no position to instantly jump out of his range. I couldn’t escape.

His palm slammed down. Dirt was thrown into the air.

“Will?!”

“Sir Will?!”

My allies shouted. And for the first time, Valacirca gave out a clear cry of pain. He stared at his *missing finger* in utter disbelief. I had struck back with the blade of Calldawn, severing a single one of his fingers, and fit myself into the gap just before his palm hit the ground.

The dragon’s fingers were as wide around as a human’s torso, but that was just thin enough to sever with a single swipe of my sword, as long as I timed it right. And I’d been exchanging blows with him for long enough now to have a perfect grasp of the timing.

Although Valacirca was a battle-hardened dragon—no, *because* he was a battle-hardened dragon, the tempo, rhythm, and patterns of his attacks weren’t that complicated. He could crush most opponents just with his unfairly huge body and his countless Words. He had no need to add in other tricks like complicating the tempo and rhythm of his attacks or coming prepared with multiple different attack patterns.

A tiger doesn’t train in the martial arts to take down its prey. This dragon was exactly the same. Natural predators don’t bother with unnatural things like training or tricks. They have no need to. In terms of both raw physical ability and years of practice, I couldn’t compare. But if there was one thing I could exploit, this was it.

I pulled my foot out of the mud and moved straight into an attack, taking advantage of how much losing a finger had shaken him. But Valacirca was not to be underestimated. He immediately let loose a powerful binding-type Word, attempting to ensnare my legs. I was forced to hammer a Word of Negation into it and take a leap backwards.

The way he used support Words was extremely skillful. Even though he’d probably never trained in anything like martial arts, his use of Words must have made many a skilled hero suffer a very bitter defeat. He wasn’t just using straightforward attacks.

“RRRRRRRRRAAA!!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

His howl and my battle cry intertwined. Sword and claw, Word and blessing crossed each other again.

“Fiiiire!”

Countless arrows shot from the side towards the dragon’s enormous body. Apparently, while I’d been facing the dragon from the front, Al had led a platoon around the side.

“Chaaaarge!”

Another platoon of dwarves charged at the dragon from a different direction.

“Hahaha! Yes!!”

The foul-dragon gave a roaring laugh, and his rampage grew ever more furious.



With a single swing of the dragon’s claws, a warrior in full armor was diced into pieces and flung through the air. With a single sweep of his tail, the top halves of several warriors literally disappeared. Dragons were beings close to the Words. Not even ghosts could escape their clutches.

But the dead dwarven warriors would not be cowed. They didn’t flinch, they didn’t fear. Roaring in unison, they kept moving directly forwards towards the dragon. They buried swords and axes into his legs. They pelted him with longbow arrows and crossbow bolts. His scales blocked most of them, but it was here that the wounds I’d inflicted on the dragon finally started to pay off. Bit by bit, damage started to accumulate over his body.

“There!”

Menel’s own arrows blended into the endless volley, the elementals of air applying slight corrections to his already deadly accurate aim. One after another, the arrows sunk into the wounds I’d inflicted at the exact spots the dragon was bleeding from.

The arrowheads were not shining with the radiance of mithril. They were black as sin. Then I realized. He had slathered the mithril arrowheads with the hydra venom he’d obtained in the marsh. Hydra venom was such a strong

poison that a single drop of it could cause a large and vicious beast to roll onto their back convulsing. No matter how large or tough Valacirca was or how strong his miasmic nature, a poison that intense being delivered repeatedly into his wounds was going to have its consequences. If it had been Menel's arrows alone, the dragon might have had some way of dealing with them, but right now there was also the incessant rain of arrows from the dwarves. Using the other arrows as camouflage, Menel was free to chip away at the dragon from afar.

Bit by bit, Valacirca's movements began to dull. And as they did, Reystov, Ghelreis, and the dwarven spirit warriors daringly took their blades to him. More of the dragon's scales were torn off. Reystov's approach was different from mine. He didn't try to cut directly *into* the scales; instead, he slid his blade into the small gap behind them and sliced them off. That is, he inserted his blade between the dragon's scales *as it was moving around*. It was a feat of monumental speed and masterful technique.

"Pests!"

Valacirca's supple tail swept sideways to slam into them.

"Now, everyone!"

All around Ghelreis, the dwarves put up layer after layer of shields, using the ground and their bodies to support them at a diagonal angle.

"We are invincible!"

"Roar, fire of courage!"

As the dwarves bellowed, the wall of myriad shields was built. Magic shields engraved with Signs activated one after another.

"?!"

The dragon's tail swept in, but veered diagonally upwards. The ordinary dwarves and their countless shields had made no attempt to avoid the blow. Instead, they had knocked it off course.

"Give us back—"

By that time, Al had drawn close to the dragon's legs.

“Our home!”

With his abundance of physical strength, Al held the halberd clad in divine fire high above his head and brought it down with a full swing into the dragon’s leg. At the moment of impact, there was a tremendous sound. It was a volcanic, explosive strike, as if the god of fire’s fist had been delivered directly to the dragon’s leg.

At last, Valacirca’s enormous bulk toppled off-balance and crashed to the ground with a thunderous boom. This was our chance. We could finally take aim at the vulnerable parts of his body that had been inaccessible before because of the dragon’s sheer size. The tide of battle had begun to turn in our favor!

I ran towards the dragon’s huge body. As I did, a chill ran down my spine. The foul-dragon Valacirca was grinning.



Black smoke spilled from Valacirca’s mouth. In fact, I could see his belly and throat glowing red. It was obvious that an enormous amount of miasmic breath, storing the overwhelming heat of lava, had built up inside his belly. He looked ready to burst.

The realization hit me. For a very long time now, *Valacirca hadn’t used his breath*. This situation was exactly what he’d been aiming for. He had allowed his breath to overflow inside his belly all this time and drawn the main warriors in towards him, waiting for exactly this moment, when he could engulf himself and everything around him!

“I didn’t want harm to come to my treasure, but...”

If I had to guess, he was confident that he was the only thing that could withstand this heat. Valacirca had called himself the king of poison and brimstone and brother to lava. His own heat and poisonous breath would never be fatal for him, even if he pushed his own limits, storing up more than his body was meant to handle and expelling it all at once. This was Valacirca’s final trick. If that breath left his mouth, we were finished.

“Gallant warriors...”

“Maxima...”

I left the whole concept of making decisions behind me.

“This is your destruction!”

“Acceleratio!!”

I blindly incanted a Word and kicked off the ground. Action-reaction abnormalized. I could feel the bones fracture in my takeoff foot. As I pushed the bones throughout my body to breaking point, I flew towards the dragon’s throat like a bullet.

Everything became gray. Time moved like molasses. Valacirca’s eyes locked on me as I flew towards him. I saw him go for the breath anyway.



I raised up Calldawn and screamed a battle cry. The warriors' memories I held within my chest told me the Word needed to draw out the power of this enchanted sword. It was a sword that the god of fire, Blaze, had given to his own minions as they headed into the darkness of the underground. Generations of dwarven lords throughout history had imbued it with mana in annual ceremonies. And its true nature was just as its name implied.

"Solis... ortus!!"

Blinding light and fire erupted from the golden sword, eradicating the darkness covering the Great Cavern in an instant. The incandescent blade of light, the miniature sun that the silent god of fire had given to his minions, plunged into the throat of the wicked black-dragon. The dragon's scales, the tough muscle in its neck—none of it mattered to the blinding blade.

At the same instant, all the scorching poison of the dragon's stored breath erupted from his sliced windpipe and exploded everywhere. The force of the explosion blew my body into the air. For a brief moment, I thought I saw the corners of the foul-dragon's mouth curve up, as if he were saying, "Bravo."

If the miasma and scorching heat that was Valacirca's breath had issued from his mouth, it would have headed for all of us. But it erupted out like an explosion, and all of it headed towards me instead, as the one who had slashed the dragon's throat. Of course it would. It was obvious what would happen if you stuck a knife in a hose full of water just before it was about to start spraying. But despite how obvious it was, my body had moved before I'd thought at all. I'd taken such a direct hit that I was sure not even my soul would remain. But...

Maybe taking down a dragon isn't a bad way to go. That was my honest, natural thought. If this is how I go, it's pretty good. Cut the throat of a godly dragon, and perish. What an amazing end.

The storm of burning fire and poison corrosive enough to melt bone engulfed me. But a moment passed, and all I felt was confusion. The pain of my flesh burning, the agony of my bones melting, was yet to come. The badge of honor on my arm shone weakly, protecting me. Its shine was quickly swallowed up by the storm of heat and poison.

But in that moment, I felt that Mary was scolded me, saying, “You mustn’t give up.”

The intense heat and poison hit me at last, finally surpassing the protection of my stigmata. My skin melted. My flesh melted, exposing my bones. My eyeballs, my organs started to melt. Gritting my teeth through the pain, *I pulled out Overeater.*

“■■■■■■!!”

Voicelessly screaming with a scorched throat and unable to see, I stabbed the blade into Valacirca’s body. I could feel the thorns of mana growing. My body, being melted away by poison and heat, started being repaired. It was agony enough to drive me insane. The cells throughout my body were incinerated, regenerated, incinerated again. Still I kept my desperate grip on Overeater, with hands that were melting and regenerating over and over.

I melted.

I healed.

I melted.

I healed.

There was pain, only pain.

Pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain, pain—

If you just let go of the sword, all this—

I forcibly suppressed the thought.

Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

I had to live.

Pain.

Pain.

I melted.

My body melted.

I healed.

Pain. Pain, pain, pain...

But through it all, I had to live.

Because that... was my promise... to my god.

To the end. To the end. To the very, bitter end!

Never give up on living!

With my entire body consumed by excruciating pain, clinging onto a single promise, I lost consciousness.



I woke up lying in a puddle of blood.

“Will! Hey, Will!”

“Sir Will!”

Menel and Al had shaken me awake. Reystov and Ghelreis were also looking over me, concerned.

“Nn... ggh... Wait, what?”

Strangely enough, my body wasn’t hurting. In fact, I felt great.

“Hey, can you talk? You know what’s going on?”

“I’m... okay, Menel.”

“Don’t stand yet.”

“No, really... I feel pretty good.” I got up. I didn’t even stagger. My entire body was covered in blood and felt disgusting, but that was all. The blood splattered on me was still warm. I couldn’t have been out for very long.

I looked around. Valacirca’s now-unspeaking corpse lay there quietly. He was huge. Seeing him lying there silent had given me a new appreciation of his size. I had cut down a dragon... and survived... apparently. It didn’t feel real.

Lying on the battle-ravaged ground were Calldawn and Overeater, both of

them completely intact. These were definitely weapons from the age of the gods. It seemed that even dragonbreath couldn't destroy them.

The pale dwarven warrior spirits were slowly beginning to fade away. Perhaps slaying the dragon, which had always been their desire, had left them with no more unfinished business in this world. Without their help, we would have had no chance of winning.

"Thank you." I lowered my head. In reply, they raised their shields and axes and gave us unreserved smiles.

"You saved us, brothers."

"Thanks for the support."

"Farewell, friends and forebears. The young master and I will take it from here."

Menel, Reystov, and Ghelreis spoke in turn. Al was the last. "I swear I will bring back the Iron Country as it once was," he said quietly, placing his hand over his heart.

They replied to this with satisfied smiles, and then slowly, like smoke, they rose toward the heavens. Gracefeel's Herald-flame quietly accompanied them. For a while, we stood in silence and watched them go.

After I had seen off the dwarven warriors, I took a moment to check what state I was in. Even my mithril mail was in tatters, and my clothes had been completely incinerated. It was no surprise. I had taken a blast of fully-charged dragonbreath face-on. The cloak I was currently wearing had apparently been considerately put on me by Al as I lay on the ground naked. I still had burns and poison sores all over my body. I looked at my arms and saw that my badge of honor was still there. I breathed a little sigh of relief.

"Hm?"

Except for those burns on my arms, all the other burns and sores across my body were slowly fading.

"What?"

Something was strange. Ever since I got up, I'd been feeling fantastic. I felt as

if I was overflowing, somewhere deep inside me, with an outrageous amount of power and *fight*.

“Umm...” I looked around near me. My eyes settled on a large rock as big as a person’s head. I picked it up easily with one hand. The weight wasn’t unusual, but it was unusual that I was able to grip it one-handed with just my fingers. That should have been nearly impossible.

“The hell?”

“What?!”

Everyone’s eyes widened. But somehow, I still felt that I could go further. I squeezed my hand. Cracks formed in the rock. The cracks became fissures, spread in the blink of an eye, and the rock broke apart, falling from my hand in pieces. I was speechless. *What was that?*

“You sucked the life from a dragon of the gods. What did you expect?”

I heard the flapping of wings. A raven with crimson eyes landed on a large piece of rubble in front of me. It was Stagnate’s Herald-raven.



“Your soul and body were heated red by dragonbreath, forged through an exchange of life with the dragon, and quenched with the dragon’s dying blood.”

I frowned.

“Your face tells me you’re confused. To put it bluntly, divine dragon factor has mixed deeply into your soul and body. It makes sense that you can break a rock with your bare hands. You’ve become *something* somewhat close to a dragon but with the form of a person, and right now that’s expressing itself unsuppressed.”

Umm.

“As I’m sure you’ll be able to tell if you try it out, in that state ordinary blades won’t pierce your skin, and the Words of ordinary sorcerers will feel like nothing more than a gentle breeze. If you wield any ordinary weapon, the weapon will break, and as dragons are close to the Words, dragon factor will

multiply the power and accuracy of your own Words as well. Your lifespan... well, who can say? Your natural lifespan doesn't seem to have increased as far as I can tell, but you're much more resistant to infirmity and infection. As a result, you might live some amount longer."

What was this insanity?

"That said... Right now, you're burning with power and a desire to fight, aren't you?"

"Yes, it's... quite strong."

"It was factor from that prideful and violent dragon. It's to be expected. That state will cause the beast within you to grow. Do your best to suppress the dragon factor and not let its power go to your head. Otherwise, it will be your downfall."

Siegfried suddenly came to mind. He was the main character of a German heroic epic, a hero who gained an immortal body by bathing in dragon blood but brought himself to ruin through love and hate. What destroys warriors is sometimes not the battles they fight, but the comeuppance for their actions.

"I'll remind you, I don't want to see you dying a miserable death."

"Stagnate..."

The god of undeath's Herald-raven clicked its beak and laughed. Its body was slowly starting to disappear, unraveling into a mist the color of darkness.

"I've used up all of my strength but, well, I did help slay that meddlesome foul-dragon and put you in my debt. Not a bad trade. You *do* feel grateful to me?"

"Yes."

I wasn't going to deny that. If not for Stagnate's interference, I would have died. Though I hated to admit it, I owed her my life.

"Wonderful! When dealing with a hero like you, burdens of obligation and debts of gratitude pay far greater dividends than suppression and subjugation! I will regret losing those dwarven warriors Gracefeel guided, but I expect it will serve me better not to ask for them and increase the debt you

owe me.”

“This is what’s scary about you.”

I *was* susceptible to that kind of manipulation. And I couldn’t just dismiss her if I owed her gratitude, even though she was an adversary to the god of the flame. Now that I thought about it, she’d managed to put Blood and Mary in her debt for certain things in connection with the High King, too. The essence of this god was definitely in her crafty manipulation skills and not her prowess in battle. Plus, because we’d once engaged in serious mortal combat, the god of undeath had a good understanding of the lines I would never budge on. I had no intention of going back on my words calling her an enemy, but it really was difficult to know how to approach this god.

“Well, it’s time for me to go. Gracefeel, thank you for your assistance.”

Gracefeel’s Herald-flame came floating gently down. Stagnate’s eyes as she watched her descend had a slightly complicated look within them. There were probably a lot of complications between these two gods as well.

“Stagnate, god of undeath.”

My god answered in a quiet tone.

“Even now, it is not too late. Will you not cast away your ideals? Will you not put away the power of undeath and guide souls with me again? If you will do this, I—”

“Stop there. And no. I will pursue my own ideals. My choice is made.”

“I see.”

The Herald-flame wavered. She seemed lonely and sad.

“Fare thee well, then, elder sister.”

“Yes. Farewell, younger sister of mine.”

Strangely, those words didn’t surprise me. They just felt right. I’d long felt that these two gods had something in common.

“Now then, William G. Maryblood. Your heroic brilliance has grown even brighter, and you have obtained vast power. But as brightness grows stronger,

so darkness spreads. Take care. Do not go mad for war, do not hate, and keep the womanizing to a—oh, of course, you don't have a woman."

"That's none of your business."

"I understand your desire to devote yourself to my little sister there, but at least find yourself a partner. You're depriving me of the pleasure of tempting your offspring!"

"That is an awful reason!"

Were all my children and grandchildren going to have to put up with this?!
What kind of curse was that?!

"If you like..."

The Herald-raven cocked its head at me. Its red eyes glistened bewitchingly.

"I can manifest a female Echo here one day. Would you care to have a child with me?"

"..."

My god's Herald-flame positioned herself between me and Stagnate and flared up fiercely, threatening her.

"Tch. I'm not asking for anything *from* you, you know. Is one child too much to ask? Rhea Silvia used to do it all the time, falling in love with heroes and bearing demigod children."

The goddess of the fae, Rhea Silvia, was said to live for love. I was sure I'd heard those kinds of stories about her, too. As far as I remembered, that was mainly in the age of the gods, though...

"Well, no matter. I'm out of time. I'll give up for now. Oh, yes, one more thing—"

As Stagnate's transformation into mist finally approached its end, she thought for a moment.

"William G. Maryblood... I once suggested you try being loved by me. I must confess a lie."

"What?" I said in confusion.

An apparition of an intellectual and kind of glamorous goddess with a mischievous smile overlapped the Herald-raven.

“I am in love with you, William G. Maryblood.”

And with that, the great god of undeath, my respected adversary, dispersed freely into mist and disappeared.



For a while, everyone—even God—was silent. What just happened? That was what they call a confession of love, right? From a god? To a person? And not just any person, someone who had openly declared his hostility to her? And to top it all off, I’d been left feeling like the victim of a confess-and-run. What was I meant to do?

As I stood there confused, Menel slapped me on the shoulder. “Wow, you can’t hold down a goddess. Best of luck, Will.”

“Shut up!”

How was I supposed to respond to whispers of love from a god?! I wouldn’t even have known how to handle a person!

“Better prepare yourself now. Women like that look laid back, but they’re actually pretty clingy.”

“Please don’t, seriously...”

The fact that Menel spoke from experience made it all the more real and frightening. Couldn’t I just pretend I hadn’t heard her?

As we had this stupid exchange...

“My knight. Heroes.”

My god tightened up this strangely relaxed atmosphere with a solemn voice. Everyone sitting and standing corrected their posture.

“You slayed the foul-dragon well. You were magnificent.”

Finally, it started to sink in. I had beaten Valacirca. I had defeated that incredibly terrifying foul-dragon and survived. I could go home alive. The thought caused a rush of relief. It felt as if Gracefeel was looking at us with

affectionate eyes.

“I shall reward your efforts. Speak unto me your desires.”

“If I may,” said Al, responding to her gentle voice. “Goddess of the flame. Would it be possible to clear the foul-dragon’s miasma from the area around these mountains, including Lothdor?”

“Now that the foul-dragon is gone, I can grant that request to an extent.”

“Then that’s what I wish for. Please purify our homeland.”

“Eh, then I guess I’ll ask for that as well,” Menel said with a shrug. “Gotta think about Dine and the others.”

Ghelreis said the same thing. “I would also like to ask that of you. For the sake of my late friends.”

Reystov nodded. “That works for me. I got what I wanted. This sword fought a dragon.”

I was a little surprised by how selfless everyone was. But then again, if they weren’t, there was no way they’d have come with me to fight a battle with such slim odds of victory.

“I’ll ask the same. Please purify and bless this land.”

“Your request is heard.”

Gracefeel’s Herald-flame incanted a Word I had never heard before. A fire blazed up exuding a curious holy aura. I could only describe it as “sacred fire.” As it spread, the fire caught alight the drifting miasma and burned it to nothing.

The fire burned up only the unholy poison, leaving no marks on anyone else. The holy fire spread across the land. The Rust Mountains began turning back into the Iron Mountains.

“Mourned shall be those who were lost; and blessed shall be those who are yet to be born.”

My god spoke Word after Word with compassion, as though she herself was praying. She spoke kindly and quietly, holding the endeavors of us small and short-lived people in a soft embrace.

“Let there be peace upon this land. May it flourish, and may there be joy.”

As her Words continued, God’s Herald-flame blurred and started to fade away. Just like the god of undeath, she had probably exhausted so much of her power that she was unable to maintain her Herald’s form.

“O heroic dragon-slayers. This land, and you that reclaimed it—”

Beyond the Herald-flame, I saw a god who had been emotionless smile softly inside her hood.

“Have the blessing of the flame forever.”

With those softly spoken words, a warm glow of light, and a striking release of the last of the sacred fire that was burning out the miasma, her Herald-flame disappeared. Unlike the god of undeath, she had hardly said anything personal to me. I thought that was very much like her. She might not have been as easy to get close to as Stagnate, but I was actually fond of the way my god was so earnest.

For a while, none of us said anything. Inside the Great Cavern, where everything had disappeared, we all basked in the glow of victory and the feeling of being alive. I suddenly got the idea to walk over to Valacirca’s corpse and close his large eyelid. With his eye closed, the foul-dragon looked just like he was sleeping. Until the moment he met his end, Valacirca remained a powerful, wicked, and proud dragon. I offered a quiet prayer for him.

I didn’t know where the soul of this formidable being would go. After all, Valacirca had said that life was a thing to be burned through, something that should shine brightly. He might have rejected a return to the eternal cycle and perished of his own will. But even so, I prayed. And I wished the soul of this dragon godspeed.

“Okay.” I finished my prayer and turned around. “We still have quite a lot of things to take care of, but let’s get it done and head back.”

“Right! You rest, Sir Will. We’ll handle—”

“No, no, no. I can’t do that.”

“Oh yes you can, you’re having a break. You’ve been going way too nuts.”

“Agreed. I never thought you’d go for the kill at a moment like that. It was a damn good strike, though.”

“Indeed it was. I don’t believe I will ever forget that flash like the sun. We shall have to have a victory celebration when we get back!”

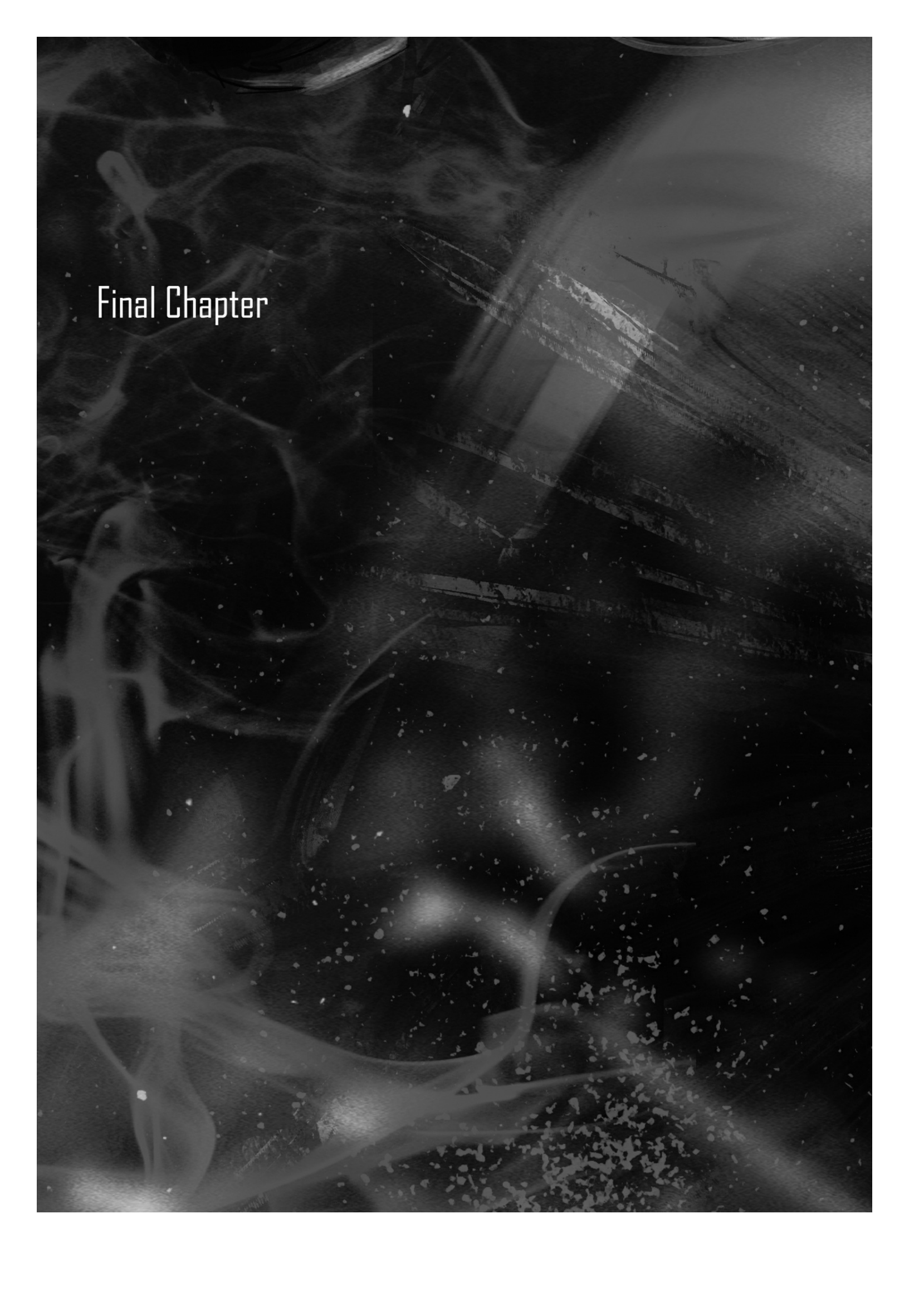
“Oh, nice! Let’s invite the Lothdor bunch, too, and get them to play for us.”

“That sounds wonderful! And we’ll have food and drink—”

“Tonio and Bee probably have it all worked out already. We’ll be having a blast for sure.”

“Ooh, I think I’m looking forward to it already!”

We were all chat and smiles. Started by no one in particular, the glorious sounds of high fives filled the cavern.



Final Chapter

After that, we acquired a number of dragon scales and treasures as proof that we'd successfully killed the dragon. With regard to Valacirca's corpse, it would be a problem if we just left it there to rot, so I used benediction to place the Miracle of Preservation on it. According to Reystov, almost all parts of a dragon's body made for high-grade ingredients and materials, so it was possible that we'd end up returning later with equipment to take it apart.

The idea of dissecting the remains of my adversary and making tools from him left me with some complicated feelings because of my sensibilities from my previous world. But that was what it meant to slay a dragon here. I was sure Valacirca had been prepared for that, and I wasn't about to hesitate, either. Having won, I intended to make full use of my victor's privileges.

That said, there was a staggering amount of treasure and dragon to move. It was too big a job for now with only the five of us. Considering the possibility that it might all get taken away by the remaining demons, we decided that for now we'd set up thorough barriers with Words and Signs and go back to the city the same way we came. The reason for not going down to the east on land, instead leaving to the west and going around the water route, was so that we could also check on the state of Lothdor and fill them in with what happened.

Incidentally, as for clothing, we'd brought some spares and also found some magical clothing embroidered with Signs among the dragon's treasure hoard. With all this together, we had just enough to make do. Full-blown winter was almost upon us, and walking around half-naked wasn't my idea of fun. Even more unamusing, I might add, was the fact that my body had turned into something that would probably cope just fine in these conditions.

On the way, everyone helped me test the capabilities of my body now that it had been exposed to dragon blood. To put it bluntly, they were quite inhuman. It was mostly just as the god of undeath had said. My muscular strength and endurance had been raised even further beyond the level I'd trained them to. My defense, especially, was very far from human. I couldn't be cut or stabbed with a worker's knife. While being very careful, we did a restrained experiment to see whether Reystov could slash me, and that went through just like normal, so apparently I wasn't invincible or immortal.

It was a similar story with my Words. I tried incanting a few, and I was amazed at how accurately I could produce the results I wanted. My precision had increased. When I honed my senses, I felt that my process of converging mana both inside and outside my body had changed somewhat. My maximum power had increased as well. I had a feeling that if I felt like it, I might be able to reduce this entire area to scorched earth with a single shout. I truly was a dragon in human form.

As for my take on all this, I felt that the situation I'd been put in wasn't very good. It was true that my battle strength had gone up. I would probably have the upper hand against Stagnate's Echo if we had a rematch, and I thought I could even put up a reasonable fight against Valacirca on my own. Judging purely by my physical abilities, if I faced an ordinary beast like the ones you could find around here, I'd probably be able to hum to myself as I crushed them without the slightest risk. And *that* was bad news.

It was incredibly dangerous to have risk disappear from battle. If I got used to this body exposed to dragon blood and took it for granted, the way I fought would become arrogant and lax. Once that happened, I was bound to die sooner or later. I wasn't sure whether it'd be by running into an enemy stronger than me, making too many enemies, or simply by being murdered, but in any case it wouldn't be pleasant. It was the same as the warning I'd received from Blood when he gave me Overeater.

What's more, it would be bad for me both as a religious person and as someone involved in politics. How strongly and for how long can a person empathize with the vulnerable if he never lets the heat or cold discomfort him, doesn't know hunger or thirst, and has the strength to survive in any place all on his own? I could see myself eventually becoming an ignorant and arrogant person who knew neither the freezing cold nor the hunger of having nothing to eat and whose only qualities were strength and intelligence.

This power wasn't a blessing from the dragon. It was a *curse*. I wondered if Valacirca had foreseen this. He almost certainly hadn't expected me to survive the breath he unleashed when we crossed in those final moments. But I could imagine him laughing and saying, "Dragons are beings who curse champions and bring their lives to destruction." I had no idea how to eliminate the dragon

factor mixed into my body and soul, and anyway, even if I did find out, this power was certainly useful. I couldn't possibly relinquish it until things were a little more settled.

In short, right at the last moment, the dragon had got me good. I had won the battle, but the war between me and Valacirca would continue for my whole life. If I met my destruction as the foul-dragon intended, I would lose. If I didn't, I would win.

As we finally exited the seemingly endless network of underground tunnels and made our way out of the West Gate, I looked up at the mountain and muttered, "You won't beat me."



We went out the West Gate and made our way down to the foot of the Iron Mountains. When the rocky paths lined with boulders came to an end, our field of view opened up. A refreshing breeze blew.

"Wow..."

Fresh buds had sprouted on what had been rows of dead trees. The poisonous sludge had vanished and become fertile soil. Where there had been bog, there was now either firm ground or rich fen, depending on where you looked. It was completely different from the wet and dismal sight I'd encountered when I first came here.

"Heeey! Heeey!"

A group of elves called out from the distance and headed our way. At the head of the group was an elf with golden hair and violet eyes I recognized as Dine.

"So you *are* all right!" she said, running up to us. "We heard the dragon howling so many times, and the next thing we knew, everything went quiet and suddenly this strange fire rushed past us and this whole area was clean..."

Then, taking in the fact that none of us were missing, she hugged us all, sobbing out, "I'm so glad you're safe!"

The smell of poison no longer surrounded her, either. The only smell floating

around her now was a pleasant one, a mixture of a womanly scent and the smells of earth and greenery.

“You’re making a big deal of it,” Menel said.

“I am not! I really... thought you might never come back...”

“We won, though. I mean, look around, the dragon’s dead. Will killed him.”

In contrast to Menel’s curt attitude, Dine’s voice was choked with tears.

“Look, I’m not dying yet. I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Stuff?”

“Well, for starters, this place needs restoring. This area’s still dealing with the aftereffects of the foul-dragon’s poison, right?”

“That’s a good point.” Al nodded and frowned with a concerned expression. “There were some traces of miasma left in a few places in the mountains, and there are probably some demons left over, too.”

Certainly, it seemed that quite a lot of the miasma had been cleared away, but it wasn’t to the point where I couldn’t sense any at all. Besides, the dangerous demons who had settled here because of the toxic environment wouldn’t leave so easily. It looked like it was going to be a while yet before the Iron Country and Lothdor could regain the bustle they’d had in the old days.

“We have a mountain of the dragon’s treasure, so for the time being we can draw a little from that.”

“We shall need to consider how to distribute it, as well.”

“It’ll be no good to have a ton of wealth entering the system and screwing up the balance of goods and money. Have a chat with Tonio or something.”

“Right!”

“Also, since we’ve taken back the mountain, the people who lived in the old Iron Country will try to come back, right?”

“So we’d better make sure it’s ready to take them or we’re gonna have a mess on our hands.”

The list of things to do kept growing longer.

“I don’t much feel like it, but maybe I should show my face back at my old home forest as well and ask if they could send out a few talented elves,” Menel muttered with a frown on his face.

The silver-haired half-elf who had once run away from that forest would be returning there as a decorated dragon-slayer holding the qualification of Lord of the Woods and carrying an item that once belonged to one of their departed heroes. When I thought about just how much drama that would create, well, suffice it to say his expression didn’t surprise me. Menel wasn’t the kind of person to think of going back successful so he could have the last laugh. If he wasn’t comfortable somewhere, he was the type to burn his bridges behind him and cut the whole thing out of his life. He’d probably never intended on bothering to go back there.

However, when it came to adjusting the delicate balance of mountains and forests, it was better to have multiple skilled elementalists at hand who knew about the workings of nature and the fae. There was no question that it would be to our advantage if Menel could regain his connection with his homeland.

“Then I’ll come as well,” Dine said.

“You?”

“We’re the ones they’re helping! Of course I have to come and bow my head to them!”

“Uh, well, I guess. Let’s take a trip across the sea in spring, then. You okay with that, Will?”

“Of course,” I said with a laugh and a nod.

I had the feeling that it would just make for even bigger drama, but I couldn’t see how that was going to hurt me!

“Damn you, grinning like it’s not your problem!”

I laughed again. It looked like it was going to be a while yet before the Iron Country and Lothdor could regain the bustle they’d had in the old days. But even if it took some time, I was sure: one day, the splendid townscape of Lothdor would be rebuilt and filled with beautiful songs and music, and the furnaces of the Iron Country would again glow with bright-red fire as the sounds

of hammers echoed through its halls.



After the warm reception at Lothdor, we got back on our boat, set sail up the now clear-flowing river, and arrived at the lake. We crossed the lake, made our way through the mist, and headed back to the city of the dead.

“Aha!” Gus was there. He was floating near the outskirts of the ruined city, looking restless.

As a completely random aside, the sight of a ghost under bright sunlight is incredibly strange.

“So you didn’t snuff it. Hmm...” Gus looked at me suspiciously. “Your mana flow is odd. Dragon factor?”

He got it in one. It was no wonder they called him the Wandering Sage.

“That’s a curse, you know.”

“I know. I’ve come to terms with it, too, Gus.”

It was the price for my victory over Valacirca and the proof that that prideful foul-dragon had indeed seen his draconic philosophy through to the end.

“Good,” he grunted. Then, with a switch of attitude, he said, “Come on, then! You all look very tired!” and invited us into the temple.

I hadn’t been too aware of it until now, but I guess I was quite high-strung. I kneeled in front of Blood and Mary’s graves, told them all about my battle with the dragon, and then, completely spent, I slept like a log. I had fought battle after battle, and now I had finally arrived somewhere where I didn’t have to be on my guard. Having been exposed to the blood of a dragon, my body was hardly complaining of tiredness at all. However, I had been put at risk of death so many times that my mind must have been in need of a break. I fell asleep, forgetting even about my morning prayer routine, and I dreamed of the days of my childhood with Mary and Blood. It was a fun dream of running around on that temple hill.



Our brief moment of rest came to an end. It came time for us to return to

Torch Port.

“Let us return the weapons we borrowed,” Al said to Gus. Gus casually waved a hand.

“No, no. Take them, I won’t use them.”

“But aren’t they mementos of the precious allies who fought with you?”

“You’re an upright lad, aren’t you?” He smirked. Gus was actually pretty fond of people with conscience like this. “That they belonged to comrades-in-arms is all the more reason they should be passed down to new users. Weapons and armor were created as tools. Leaving them locked up in storage, not even presented for anyone’s appreciation? Nothing could be more meaningless.”

“Then I’ll take these with many thanks.”

“Mm. They will be the equipment of a new dwarven lord. You will do that gear an honor.”

“Oh.” Those words reminded me. “Calldawn.”

That golden sword was still strapped to my hip. I hadn’t thought about it until now. My primary weapon, Pale Moon, had been seriously damaged, and I couldn’t afford to use Overeater lightly. There had still been a chance of a battle with roaming beasts or the remnants of the demons, so I’d kept Calldawn on me all this time...

“No. That sword belongs to you, Sir Will.”

“I can’t take this. It’s been passed down among the dwarves for generations. It’s your treasured sword!” I insisted that he’d need it to demonstrate he was their legitimate ruler and so on, but Al refused to take it from me, saying that Lord Aurvangr had deliberately given it to me.

“Sir Will, you were born under the star of a hero. Please take this sword to help you so you don’t lose your life in the battles to come.”

Despite all that, I couldn’t simply *take* this sword. So I decided that I would borrow it instead and put down in writing that the sword was to be returned to the Iron Country after I died.

“Anyway, you’re kind of talking like stronger and stronger enemies are going

to head my way. I faced a dragon this time. A dragon! That's gotta be *it*, right? It's not like enemies stronger than that turn up every day of the week!" I said, finishing with confidence. Everyone was silent, looking at me with gazes of pity. It felt like they were thinking, *Knowing him, there'll be swarms of them*, or something. So cruel!

"Uh, y'know, live... strong." Reystov patted my shoulder clumsily but gently. "We'll help you out a little bit."

"Um, that really doesn't make me feel any better!"

Reystov made a troubled face. It was such an unusual expression for him that everyone laughed.



We traveled downstream from the city of the dead and returned to Torch Port. As we drew close, the buzz was already starting to spread. Women doing work on the outskirts covered their mouths with both hands in great surprise and almost tripped over themselves in their rush to get back to town. I heard voices exclaiming that their liege had returned and everyone was safe.

Before long, a large, noisy crowd of people had spilled out from town. By that time, we had docked our boat at the wharf; and by the time we made it ashore, Tonio was there at the head of the group to greet us. His hair seemed kind of messy, and there were bags under his eyes. I'd left him in charge before I left, but now that I thought about it, there must have been a lot of trouble during the times when the dragon was howling. It looked like I'd put a lot of strain on him. I felt pretty bad about it.

"I'm pleased to see you back. Were you... successful?"

In answer to his question, I untied a package that I'd given to Ghelreis to hold onto, revealing the twisted end of a horn and a large, thick scale.

"The demons who live in the mountain, and the foul-dragon Valacirca,"—I held the horn high in the air—"have been slain!"

A great cheer went up. Valacirca's roars and growls had reached all the way to this town. They must all have been pretty worried. And in this very moment, all their worries had been resolved.

“Woohoo! Congrats!!” A red-haired halfling came flying at me from out of the crowd. I caught her and spun her around. Bee laughed. “You’re all fine, right?! That’s great! And oh my god is that a dragon horn? Show me a sec, I’ll put it in a story later! Wait... What the—your new gear is *amazing*! Where did you get it?!”

She was really getting carried away. I could tell we were all in for a grilling later. She was going to dig down to the last detail. I was still thinking about it when a wave of joyous and thankful people swallowed me up.

There was Agnarr, Dwarftown’s leading figure. Thori and Hodh were here, too. Marcus of the Bluffers, whom I’d asked to serve as a decoy on our way out, had returned safely. He grinned at me in congratulation of our joint success.

The old dwarf Grendir had his arms around Ghelreis and Al’s shoulders. His eyes were streaming with tears. I spotted Anna, the priest, talking to Reystov with a smile and expressing her appreciation. Reystov nodded back. Menel seemed to have snuck away and was watching the fuss from a distance. That was very much like him. At least he looked like he was in a good mood.

I was mobbed. Thanks, congratulations, well done, hoorays, and more flew about. As I handled them with smiles, hugs, and handshakes, eventually things started to settle for the time being, and Tonio clapped his hands together loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Alright, that’s enough, everyone! Our lord and his party are tired! They have, after all, returned from having defeated a dragon!”

He made his way back through the crowd towards me.

“We’ll allow them a little time to recuperate, and have a party tomorrow!” He glanced in my direction and said, “I assume that’s all right with you?”

I nodded. I was no longer any match for Tonio when it came to arranging these kinds of things. Going along with the flow Tonio had created, I shouted, “We will be celebrating the slaying of the dragon! Everyone, I hope you will eat, drink, sing, and celebrate to your hearts’ content tomorrow!”

Especially loud cheers went up among the crowd. All these familiar faces were smiling. They looked like they were having fun, enjoying themselves, and simply

being happy. I thought about how I'd protected this happiness. If I hadn't taken on Valacirca, or if I'd lost to him, I would never have been able to witness this. I'd protected the things I'd gained.

There had been a point to me being reborn from my last world in which I had holed myself up constantly and was unable to go anywhere, a point to forcing myself up and keeping on walking. The full appreciation of that filled my heart and caused a lump to rise in my throat.



The first thing in the morning the following day, the grand celebration started. Tables from all over the town were dragged out into the square, and white tablecloths were draped over them. Garlands were hung everywhere, and right from the early hours of the morning, steaming-hot dishes made by the ladies of the town were pulled out from houses all over. So many people had showed up, each groomed and dressed for the occasion, and every one of them was smiling.

In formal dress, I raised my voice on the platform. "Uh, I won't talk long. I'm as starving as the rest of you!" I cracked a light joke. Laughs came back. "In celebration of the successful slaying of the dragon and the bountiful blessings we have received, I ask you to raise your cups to the goddess of the flame, and all the good gods!"

"To the goddess of the flame, and all the good gods!" everyone shouted.

"Cheers!" I called out, and they all called back the same, raising their countless cups. There were some made from horns, and others made from wood; some had been decorated in vibrant colors, while others were plain. They all knocked noisily together and were drunk dry one after another as the party progressed.

All over, conversations filled the air unprompted, punctuated with bursts of joyful laughter. Amid all this, I heard the musical sound of strings. Seizing on the chance to profit, Bee had happily started playing her rebec and telling a story.

It was a story of elves, dwarves, and their two countries, finally returning to this land after being lost to the Great Collapse two hundred years ago. It was the story of Lothdor and the Iron Country. The delicate movements of her

fingers lent color to her tale, sometimes with bright music and other times sad.

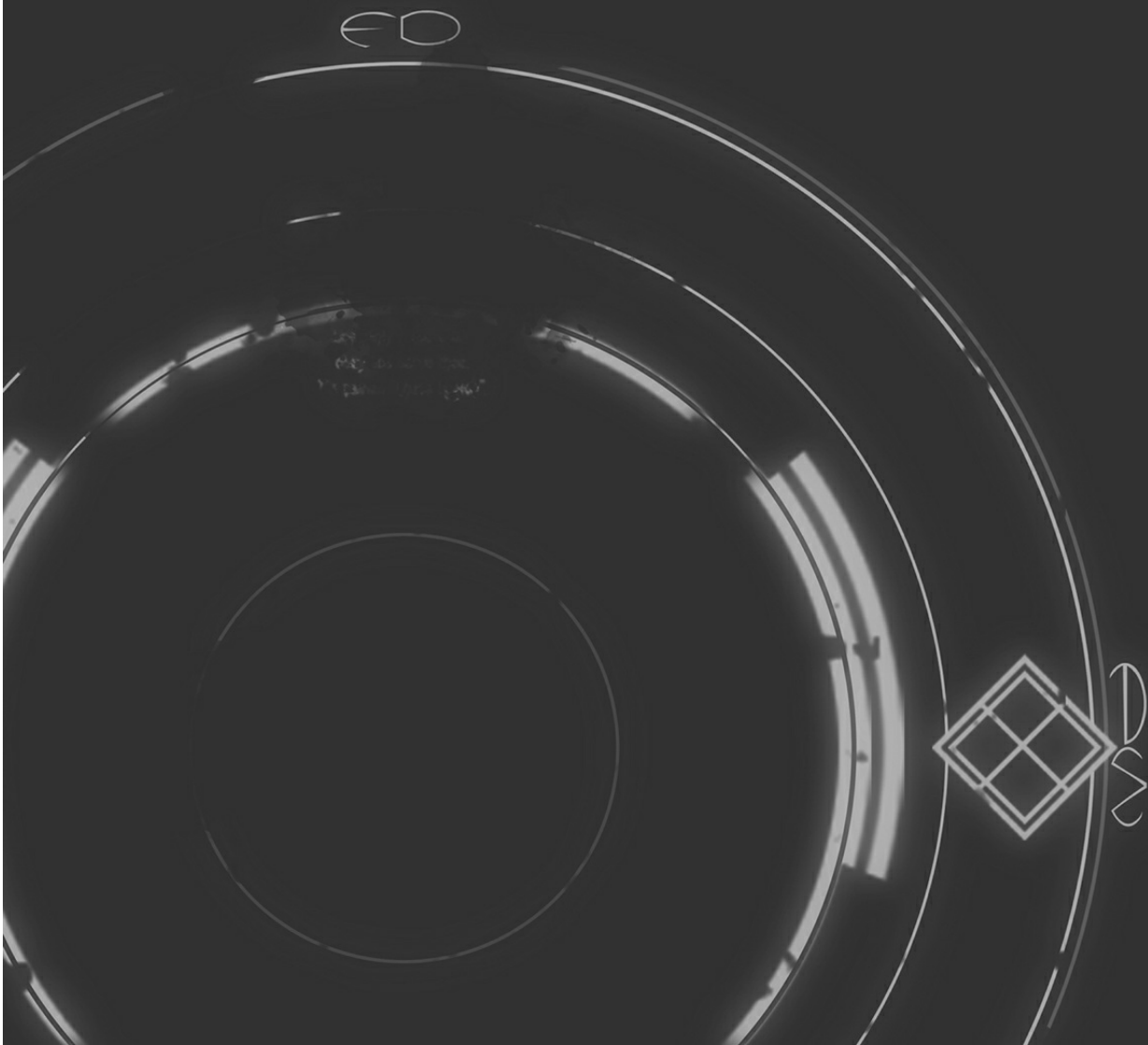
Then there was a transition. The sound stopped. She spoke quietly, without music. The story of the two countries ended with their destruction. But then, ever so quietly, the strings began to sing again. And Bee sang that as long as there were people, as long as there was the will, the countries would revive. Just like reincarnation's eternal cycle, even when all fell into darkness, the caring goddess of the flame would shine her light upon it.



Even if poison and darkness covered everything, and the land became a place of terror where hideous demons roamed and a wicked dragon howled, still the Faraway Paladin would bravely venture forth, driving out the darkness of this southern continent with the gentle goddess of the flame by his side. Bee's rebec sang of how the Paladin slayed the dragon, loudly for all to hear.

The Faraway Paladin III: The Lord of the Rust Mountains — *Finis*.

Side Story: The Moon's Journey



Glittering rays of sunlight shone through an endless number of enormous trees lined up like a temple's colonnade. We were deep in Beast Woods, in the domain of the great Lord of the Woods, the Lord of Holly.

"Ohh! This is, great place! *'You are very thoughtful, Sir William.'*"

"*'No, trouble.'* So, about what we discussed..."

"Muh-huh. We accepted."

The one nodding back was someone so large he was impossible to forget. He was the forest giant I'd fought with once, Gangr of the race of Jotunn. Tribal giants were walking all around the area with curiosity, setting up large canopy tents made of beast hide. The men were over three meters tall and the women more than two and a half, so they were quite the sight. It kind of made me feel like a halfling.

"Fighting people is a pain, whether win or whether lose."

"You're not kidding."

I had slain the dragon, returned home, and held a party. If this were a story, it would have wrapped up at that point with "And they all lived happily ever after" and the fall of a curtain, but unfortunately, this was reality. There had been a lot of things to do in the aftermath. I'd reported to various relevant parties including His Excellency Ethel and Bishop Bagley to tell them that the issue had been safely resolved. To avert riots, I'd allayed the concerns of people who had become anxious. I'd checked the spread of misinformation by widely publicizing the facts. The dragon's howling had caused trouble that required an urgent response all across Beast Woods. I'd brought all kinds of trouble under control, even trouble that was only brewing.

Even after all that was mostly dealt with, there were still a host of other things I needed to do. Figuring out what to do about the clan of forest giants we'd discovered had been one of them. Just like the dragons, the race generally called giants was said to be neutral, neither affiliated with the good gods nor the evil gods.

"Neutral" here didn't mean that they wouldn't support either side because they disliked conflict entirely. They could cope without the protection of either

set of gods, and if someone picked a fight with them, no matter which faction the aggressor was part of, they had the strength to hit back and do a spectacular amount of damage. So they had no reason to bother getting involved in a faction war between these guys called gods. They were “neutral” in an extremely powerful sense.

It was said that in comparison to other giants, forest giants had only weakly inherited the blood of the Primordial Giants who existed in the age of the creation myth. Over the generations, their divinity had diminished, their lifespans had shortened, and they had become smaller, too. Despite that, however, their bodies were still three meters tall, and they had a high level of skill as elementalists, although they still fell quite a way short of Menel. There weren't many of them, but they were a race of extremely high-quality and powerful battlemages. And this was what the comparatively weak-blooded forest giants were like.

The anecdotes about the Primordial Giants who had retained a strong influence from the age of creation were even more crazy. There were the towering Storm Giants, who lived in the eyes of tempests in the southern seas and walked the seas accompanied by raging winds. There were the Lava Giants, who spent eons sleeping within lava in large volcanic belts and woke up from time to time when the volcanoes erupted. There were the Cloud Giants, who made their home atop inexhaustible thunderclouds in the wastes far to the east and ran about the skies at will.

Though many of them had already departed this dimension, just hearing them described gave me a dizzying feeling of scale. I could understand why it was said that dragons and giants were equals. If I'd been something like that, I would have been able to fight Valacirca, one of the Primordial Dragons, in a physical punching match without ever retreating a single step.

Anyway, the problem was that we had discovered we had some very powerful neighbors deep in the forest. They may not have been quite as extreme as the mythical beings I described, but they had certainly inherited their blood. The fact that they were living in the depths of Beast Woods meant that beasts were nothing to them. In fact, judging by the lines of beast-hide canopies, they were the predators here, and the beasts were their prey. They were stronger than

the beasts, in other words.

If they spread outwards and had an unfortunate collision with the steadily expanding area where people were living, all hell would break loose. Specifically, if a careless encounter turned into a fight and someone ended up dying on one side or the other, there might be no coming back from that. The casualties that would result would be absolutely no joke, and nothing good would come of it for anyone.

Of course, because the two of us did know each other, the negotiation route was open. It was possible that we could work something like that out with compensation. But that was a last resort, not something to rely on from the beginning. Which was why—

“Gangr and clan will protect big Lords.”

I had decided to approach them to ask whether they would move to the areas of the forest with the two gigantic trees known as the Twins of the Woods: the Lord of Oak and the Lord of Holly. I already knew their locations from the time we had that trouble with the horned demon called a Cernunnos.

Those two Lords of the Woods were the most vital part of Beast Woods. We couldn't allow their domains to be destroyed with a Taboo Word or something, or it would be a disaster. However, the sacred territory of a Lord of the Woods had to remain lush with greenery by its nature, and so we couldn't afford to let many people into it or develop it on any large scale. Basically, the only way to handle those areas was to treat them as forbidden; yet providing them no protection at all was also not an option.

We were between a rock and hard place, and that was where the giants came in. They would get a virtually permanent place to live, where they would never inadvertently bump into humans, and the Twins would have powerful guardians they could talk with living right nearby. This would most likely be beneficial for both of them.

I shook hands with him to conclude our contract. His hand was big and thick.

“Come to think of it... ‘Gangr, where, Western Common Speech?’”

“Long ago, near the outside the forest, a good man was... uhh... ang... angry...”

angry culture...? *'Farming.'* I learned a bit from trade him fur and grain."

"Huh..."

"That was before three hundred springs came, or more. After, one of the clan fought with humans. We moved into forest deep."

That really was a long time ago. But if that was the case—

"Is it still... *'possible, trade-things'?*"

"Muh-huh. *'We would be grateful to trade for metal, but what do you need?'*"

"We *'want, herbs, wood, beast hide, bones.'*"

We talked like that about the items we wanted for a while and agreed on the general idea. We could leave the specifics to the people who would actually be involved in the trading.

"Oh," Gangr said as that topic fizzled out. His eyes were on my back. "What you... uh... *'What happened to that spear?'*"

I did my best to force a smile onto my face as I answered him, but I probably made it a bitter one accidentally. "Unfortunately, it broke during my battle with the dragon."

Gangr looked sorry for asking.



Pale Moon was destroyed. It had been shattered, broken, and mangled during my battle with Valacirca. It may have been a spear protected by countless Signs, but attacks from a dragon, a being close to the Words, were the one thing it couldn't handle. I'd been taking care not to let my weapons get destroyed, of course, but there was a limit to what I could do in that situation. So there was nothing I could have done. I just had to accept it...

I gave a long sigh. It was still depressing.

Having returned to Torch Port after that, I was now sitting on a pier and sighing. To tell the truth, I had already checked whether Pale Moon could be fixed. I had His Excellency introduce me to the most skilled blacksmith in Whitesails, and I asked him if there was anything he could do. The reticent

blacksmith silently shook his head and said nothing else.

I must have had a unbearably sad look on my face when I received that answer. Perhaps out of pity, the blacksmith did some shortening work on the part of Pale Moon's broken blade that had the Word of Light engraved on it and made a little dagger for me. The parts with the Signs of Sharpness and Strengthening were shattered and unsalvageable.

"It's hard to get over it."

I pulled the dagger shortened from Pale Moon from its sheath that was strapped to my hip and held it up to the sun. The blade gleamed nostalgically. But this dagger now fell far short of the standard of performance that I needed out of a weapon. It was lacking in too many ways for even my normal self to wield, and I dreaded to think what would happen if I tried seriously swinging it around after awakening the power of the foul-dragon sleeping in my soul. It would probably break the first time I hit it against something.

I had many opponents to fight, from beasts to the remnants of the demons and even the minions of unknown evil gods in the south. I couldn't keep on using a poor-performance weapon just because of sentimentality. It was probably about time I searched for a new main weapon already. After all, at this point, I could pick whatever weapon I wanted.

Even the weapons I'd picked up while hunting around old ruins included several spears that simply outperformed Pale Moon. And if I wasn't happy with any of those, I could pay some money to the merchants of Whitesails and buy a whole collection of spears from all kinds of places which could be transported here by ship. If I used my connections and made some earnest requests, I could probably even obtain the secret weapons of the dwarves or the elves.

I had access to a spear of old magic, with Signs of fire and lightning incorporated into the blade. There was a spear that tracked the enemy when thrown and could be returned to hand with a single Word. There was a consecrated spear that sharpened the mind of its holder and enhanced their resistance. Another option was a spear of misdirection made of mithril that was imbued with mystifying fairies. There was even a plain but easy-to-use spear that had simply been made to be extremely sharp and durable and which had

been fortified with a Sign so that it would never dull.

But none of them felt right.

I'd probably been using Pale Moon for too long. Objectively speaking, Pale Moon wasn't that strong a spear. It couldn't match up to Overeater, the life-sucking sword that a demon king had made to kill the High King he opposed; nor was it a match for Calldawn, the small golden sun created by the god of the forge. It was simply an ordinary sturdy spear with an adjustable length and a shining blade. But even so, no matter what anyone said about it, that ordinary sturdy spear with an adjustable length and a shining blade had definitely been the Faraway Paladin's main weapon. It had been the one weapon I most relied upon.

I couldn't believe this had become of my favorite weapon. I probably still hadn't picked myself up from the shock. I got the feeling I could now understand why Reystov insisted so strongly on his favorite sword. None of these weapons had the most important factor I'd taken for granted all this time: absolute confidence in them built up over years. Losing this was a bigger blow than expected.

I gazed silently at the dagger and thought about what to do with it. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't take this shortened Pale Moon out on my adventures. If I did, it would either be simple dead weight, or I would break it. And yet, it didn't feel right to leave it just decorating the mansion as a memento. What to do, I wondered. What could I do with this...

There were still many things to be done in the aftermath of the dragon-slaying, but I couldn't get my mind off this. While I was deep in thought—

"I'm gonna do this, dammit! I'm doing this and I mean it!"

I heard a pretty spirited voice.



Walking along the street beside the river, apparently seething with anger, was a boy about thirteen or fourteen years old. He had messy, black hair and strong, hazel eyes. He'd thrown on a coat over rough hemp clothing, and on his back was a crude quiver and bow. Also strapped to his waist was a club that he'd

apparently cut from wood without much care. I guessed he was a hunter or adventurer in training.

“I’m gonna kill a beast and get its head!”

“L-Let’s not, Glen... It’s too dangerous!”

“Shut up, Alex, I’m going!”

Chasing after the boy was a ginger kid of about the same age, wearing slightly more substantial cotton clothing. My eyes were drawn to the dark, patched-together robe and the pretty old-looking ash wand with a little bit of cloudy silverwork at the tip. This one was clearly a sorcerer—but didn’t seem like a product of the Academy. Perhaps it was some regional hexmage branch of magic?

As I continued to watch idly, the boy disregarded the sorcerer’s attempts to stop him and went marching away from town.

I was getting a bad feeling, so I hurriedly called out to the two of them. “Um, excuse me.”

“Uh? Who’re you?”

The boy named Glen stared up at me with a combative look on his face. The sorcerer kid who had been called Alex looked a little relieved. I bent my knees a little and looked Glen in the eyes.

“I was just wondering where you’re going in such a rage.”

“Beast hunting, okay?! Beast hunting!”

“Beast hunting?”

“Yeah! What? Something wrong with wanting to be an adventurer?!”

Based on where we were and the direction they’d come from, I had a sneaking suspicion I knew what had happened here.

“Ahh... Did you happen to go to the Brown Bear?” I said, giving the name of an inn.

“So what if we did?!”

“U-Um, we... We just... bumped into each other on the road and... he said

let's go together... and then, um..."

"Those assholes!"

"Ahh..."

The Brown Bear was the hangout of some particularly rough adventurers, even for Torch Port. There were some fairly nasty characters among them. If a couple of young, aspiring adventurers went wandering into a place like that, the way they would be treated would probably be decidedly cruel and demeaning.

It was a safe bet what had happened. They'd pretty much been laughed out of the building, and now Glen was burning with determination to come back with the head of a beast or something and shove it in their faces. He in particular looked like he had a strong sense of justice. It had probably left a very bitter taste in his mouth that his companion had been mocked as well.

However, the cruel reality was they simply weren't strong enough. I could tell at a glance that although Glen, most likely a hunter originally, had certainly undergone some training, he was only one or two rungs up from a beginner. As for Alex, the sorcerer kid, he—maybe she? It probably wasn't worth asking. In any case, I had no idea about the extent of Alex's knowledge, but he didn't look like he had any practical battle experience. The way he stood and moved his eyes about was typical of an amateur. If a beast suddenly appeared in front of him, he would probably have difficulty uttering a swift and precise Word.

"If you keep heading that way," I said in a cold voice, "you're going to die."

This was Beast Woods. I knew firsthand how dangerous it was. Alex the sorcerer jumped a little and shrunk back. Maybe he sensed something in my tone. Glen looked overawed for just a second, but his fighting spirit quickly rekindled and he snapped back, "You can't be an adventurer if you're scared of dying, dumbass!"

He had guts. But how much?

"Alright, but have you ever thought of a situation worse than death?"

"Huh?"

"Snake-beasts paralyze their enemies and dissolve them alive in their

stomachs over several days. Have you ever imagined what it feels like for your body to be slowly dissolved?”

Alex breathed in sharply and gulped.

“Or becoming a zombie,” I said, while apologizing internally to Stagnate. “Or losing all your arms and legs and unluckily surviving. Or getting taken away by bandits and being sold into bondage.”

If he gave himself over to anger and rushed into the deep part of Beast Woods teeming with beasts, those were the kinds of fates that awaited him, unless he was blessed with very good luck. Well, actually, Beast Woods was too dangerous for there to be many bandits, but the others were true. In any case, if I could get him to reconsider, that would be for the best.

Glen grit his teeth, then drew in a breath and said, “We’ve got nowhere to go back to anyway! We’ve got no choice.”

Apparently they had no way of retreating. Glen, I supposed, had either been abandoned or lost his parents or something. From the look of Alex’s gloomy expression, it was the same for him.

“But Glen, I think Alex there won’t be able to abandon you. Alex is going to die with you.”

That took the wind out of his sails. He bit his lip. He had come all the way to Torch Port in desperation, with no knowledge and no idea of what to do. He was simply trying to use anger and momentum to force his way through the anxiety of not being able to see a way forward or a way out. I was sure that even he knew that continuing on this path would get him nowhere.

“U-Um, are you... an adventurer?” Alex asked.

“No, I’m not.” At least, I didn’t think I could call myself that anymore. “But I kind of understand them.”

“Y-You do? Then please! Please tell us! What should we do?!”

“Okay, so...”

Even when the situation is against you, full of unknowns, and panic is running high, first calmly gather information. The passion Glen had was important, but

Alex's calm disposition was also an important quality to have. With both those traits between them, their chances of survival looked good.

"Forget about the Brown Bear for the time being. At the end of that street, there's a tavern with a sign outside like a big fish. It's called the Cerulean Seagod. Try giving that place a visit. The owner there will look after you."

The owner of the Cerulean Seagod would draw together aspiring adventurers who were just starting out into proper parties, assign them requests they could handle, and give them a little bit of advice as well. Unlike the rough inns like the Brown Bear, it was a tavern of relatively—I stress that word—*relatively* good repute.

As Alex nodded at me and Glen continued to regard me with a little suspicion, I decided to give them a little more advice, though I knew they hadn't asked for it.

"Listen. 'Adventurer' probably sounds exciting to you, but do you know what it actually means? It means *risk-taker*. The job of an adventurer is to take on *risk*. And it isn't about being reckless or foolhardy. It's about making sure you're absolutely prepared so you can survive, and facing off against risks that are a matter of life and death with everything you've got."

And then Fate will bias her ruthless dice just a little in your favor.

"Never get desperate. Check what you're told. Don't skimp on gear. And you also need just a little wisdom and courage. And then someday you'll definitely get to where you want to be." I grinned. "The good gods bless you."

Before I knew it, I had taken Pale Moon's shortened dagger out and offered it to them.

"Huh?"

"Take it."

"Heh. A dagger? That's a hell of—"

"G-Glen! Glen! It... It has a Sign on it!"

"A Si—It's a *magic dagger*?!"

"Yep. The Sign really isn't anything amazing, though. I'm giving it to both of

you.”

I felt that I wanted to celebrate the start of these young adventurers’ journeys. I couldn’t travel out on adventures with Pale Moon anymore. But if Pale Moon, the spear I’d found underground on that day, could travel on adventures with someone else—if its journey could continue—that would surely be a wonderful thing.

“It has the Word of Light engraved on it, so it should be good as a lantern, at least.”

“Wh-What are you after?”

Oh, right, it would be a bit scary for someone to just give you an item like this. After all, they had no idea what I was getting out of this or why I might be doing it. I would find that creepy, too.

“Well... would you mind sticking around for a bit of a long story?”

“A long story?”

“Yep. You see, it’s an ancient warrior tradition when handing over a magic weapon to talk about its history.”

“It better not be bullshit.”

“G-Glen!”

I laughed. “I don’t mind if you treat it that way.”

In exchange, I thought it was only fair for me to keep them a while.

“This is the story of a spear,” I began. “It was forged by ancient dwarves, it killed a chimera, it punched through dragonscale...”

And the Faraway Paladin trusted it more than anything else in the world.

I recounted the journey of Pale Moon, which was always there to light up the world, even on nights when the darkest clouds covered the sky.

— *Finis.*

Afterword

To all of you with a completed book in your hands, allow me to begin with a greeting. I am Kanata Yanagino, deeply obliged to see you all once again. With your support, I was able to publish this third book. Thank you so much.

I sit here with the revised manuscript now finished, writing the afterword and thinking back to one year ago. I remember being quite panicked at the time, particularly while I was writing *Primus*. The problem was the size of it. I discussed the parts that would correspond to the third book beforehand with my friends and set the storyline in stone before I ever started to write. But once I got writing, to my horror, the amount of text started to grow far beyond what I had planned.

I had heard from several sources that this was something that happens sometimes when writing a novel. However, I had wrapped up books one and two with about the amount of text I was expecting—beginner's luck, perhaps. The pixie of carelessness and conceit took hold of me, I started to think, *Maybe I actually have a keen sense for text length?* and then reams of text took me completely by surprise.

As the volume of text continued to grow, I got very panicked and started rushing the story along, and my friend K-sensei had some words with me about that. The day I scrapped quite a large amount of text and rewrote it is one I remember vividly.

This work was an amateur creation published on the net. It was something I was writing as a hobby, the way I wanted it, with the story unfolding the way I wanted it to unfold. That was how it was supposed to be. But once I got lucky enough to be published commercially, greed started to surface whether I wanted it to or not. I wanted all the story's turns to be more interesting, to make sure all the things I mentioned early served their function by the end, to keep it all down to the size of one volume. I even wanted to leave a little bit of extra space if possible to fit a bonus story in the published version.

I wanted it to be popular. I wanted it to sell. I wanted it to be a work that I could show to others with pride. I came to the realization that although the volume of text had inflated hugely, more than anything, what had inflated were my own desires.

After that, I had a change of heart. You can't eliminate these kinds of desires completely, but I did my best to suppress them and go back to basics. I decided to write as I wanted, not worry about volume, pretend I had never been contacted about a book version, and tell the story of Will's adventure that I wanted to tell. Before I knew it, my pen was flowing naturally again. As I wrote the battles in the last act in particular, I was very excited and absorbed, and words flowed straight from my mind to the page. I feel as though writing this story has taught me a lot of important things.

This third book was stuffed to the gills with the many things I received from the fantasy worlds I fondly remember from my past. I sincerely hope you all enjoyed it as well.

Finally, some acknowledgments. To Kususaga Rin-sensei, who drew such beautiful illustrations for me: I am filled with happy feelings every volume whenever I lay eyes on your drawings. I also want to congratulate you on the release of your art book, *Genji Asai / Kususaga Rin Art Works*. I was very moved by the comments you made on the illustrations included from this series. I adore Menel's design.

To Minoru Kawakami, who provided the testimonial on the obi strip: I am deeply grateful. I have been a fan of yours since the first time I laid hand on your work in middle school.

To all my friends, thank you once again for the many ways you have helped me.

To my editor and the editors at Overlap; everyone involved with this book's printing, sales and marketing, and everything else related; and to you, the person who took this book into your hands, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Praying that we can meet again,

Kanata Yanagino, November 2016

Bonus Short Stories

Hobbies: Reystov

I flicked my wrist and cast the baited hook into the glimmering surface of the water. There was a light splash. A circular ripple spread out and soon faded.

“...”

“...”

Beside me was a swordsman of few words, sitting with his lips drawn together and a serious expression on his face. It was Reystov. The two of us were river-fishing together; he'd invited me after we finished a job.

Even after the battle at the Rust Mountains was over, there was no end of things to take care of. The habitats of beasts and the like around here had changed a lot after the battle with Valacirca, and there was an increase in incidents of beasts wandering into where people were living. We were never left wanting for troubles or battles.

One of these was a request, made by Tonio and taken on by Reystov and myself, to kill a monster of a fish that had found its way into the river connecting Torch Port and Whitesails and was now obstructing river trade. The word “monster” really did feel like the most fitting way to describe its appearance. It had wet, slimy skin, big fat lips, eyes that stared at nothing, and a mouth crammed full of thin, venomous fangs. Its body was large enough that it could swallow a person whole, and it was highly aggressive.

The two of us had gone out on a small boat and headed towards the area where a lot of people had said they'd seen the creature. It took a bit of effort to find, thanks in part to underwater enemies we had to fight on the way, but the battle itself was over in a flash. I caught a glimpse of the monster-fish's silhouette while using Searching magic, and before the word “there!” had even left my mouth, Reystov struck like lightning with his Word-engraved, extending sword. In the fraction of a second it had, the monster-fish moved underwater as

if to dodge, but it wasn't enough. One strike was all it took. Pierced through a weak spot, the monster-fish expired immediately and plopped belly-up to the surface of the water.

Reystov was so efficient, I almost wanted to applaud.

He drew the body close to him with a rake he had prepared and cut off a fillet as proof of the kill. All that was left was to go back home, and that was when Reystov suddenly suggested we go fishing for a bit.

I thought about it. It was no wonder the gigantic monster-fish had chosen this place as its home; there were a lot of sunken ruins in the river around here, and I could see the silhouettes of plenty of fish swimming around. It looked like a pretty good fishing spot. We had plenty of time on our hands, and we'd already gone to the trouble of bringing out the boat. The aftermath of Valacirca had settled down recently—our efforts were starting to pay off—so I thought it could be a nice idea to relax for a little while with our lines in the water. And so, I agreed.

As I started to wonder what we were going to do for gear and bait, Reystov produced two fishing rods and a pot containing doughballs from the back of the boat. I watched him shrug and laughed, realizing that he'd been planning on fishing from the start if he saw the opportunity. Even this dignified veteran swordsman had a playful side.

The two of us baited our hooks and cast out our lines, creating two light splashes in short succession. We sat there quietly with our lines dangling into the water, and every so often, we muttered a few words of conversation. I asked what the bait he was using was made of. He replied that they were made from flour and egg yolk, and the trick was to mix in a little honey. That was how our conversation started.

After that, we covered a lot of things: the town, the people in our lives, swords and spears, and all the adventures we'd been on so far. What surprised me was that Reystov offered me some pretty deep insight on the roots of some of the town's problems. It probably came from his own experiences. Ours was far from the first town he'd drifted through.

Reystov, whose interests mostly lay in going on constant adventures to polish

his sword skills and win honor and glory, had set aside time to think about the town for me. Though he would never say as much, I couldn't help but think this was an expression of friendship. It made me happy.

That said...

"Um, Reystov?"

"Little longer."

"Reystov, the sun's getting pretty low in the sky now."

"Little longer."

As usual, Reystov was having what they call fisherman's luck... or, to be blunt, he hadn't caught a thing. As the sun slowly declined towards the horizon and I started to get itchy about leaving—it really would be bad if we didn't head back soon—the float sunk.

"Oh!"

There was a tug on my rod. I hurriedly pulled. I'd hooked a large trout. I reeled it in, caught it in a net, and threw it in the basket, which was reasonably full with all the other fish I'd caught.

I felt awful.

"Little longer..."

"Reystooov!" I whined. Reystov had now gotten completely stubborn.

Get ready, I told myself. It looks like you're camping out tonight.

Hobbies: Meneldor

The outfit consisted of a soft, black satin shirt and neatly sewn woolen pants, a thin cloak of well-tanned leather with polished, plain wood buttons, brightly colored cuff bracelets, high-quality deer-leather boots, and a jade hair ornament adorning his braided silver hair.

"Good?" he asked.

I ooh'ed. "It's amazing. You're like a prince."

“It’s not *that* amazing.”

Inside a room of my mansion in Torch Port, Menel huffed a short laugh, dressed to the nines in newly tailored clothes. He normally wore hunter’s attire, which was uncompromisingly practical, but when he seriously decked himself out, his clothes and half-elf features worked together to make him look like a young noble or something.

“You really do have style,” I said.

“Ya, well, fairies and other spirits are fussy as hell about appearance.”

“Huh? They are?” I said, unintentionally wide-eyed.

Menel looked at me with a face that said, “You didn’t know that?” but even I had things I didn’t know. Gus had an encyclopedic knowledge and a strong memory, but his knowledge of the worlds of the fae and the fairies was pretty spotty in places. On top of that, there had been no elementalists in that city of the dead. Without them, Gus had figured it would be difficult for me to truly understand and appreciate knowledge about fairies, so he always put off teaching me about them in favor of more important things. Because of that, I only had superficial knowledge about spirits and the fae.

“Huh, you really don’t know.” Menel hummed in thought. “You know how they often say stuff like... things that are beautiful or perfect catch the attention of otherworldly beings?”

“Yeah.”

Similar ways of thinking had been part of my previous world, too. In order to avoid disaster and not attract unworldly beings, some people would give their children strange names or deliberately leave a single imperfection when constructing a building. That concept, that “beautiful things” were imbued with a certain kind of magical or spiritual power, could be found in many places across the world even in my previous life.

“Ephemeral beings who wander the transient world, you who love the beautiful, you who adore the radiant, you who detest the ugly, you who revile the sullied...”

Menel recited what sounded like a verse of poetry from memory.

“The fae have a different character than the gods. They’re picky, and they play favorites. They give their power to beautiful things, and they won’t look twice at anything ugly.”

“So in a way, they have easy-to-understand standards... Oh, wait a minute, is that why elves are so graceful?”

“Ya, that probably has to do with it, too.”

Being beautiful, in both a physical and a mental sense, increased the support that the fae and the fairies would provide. In short, there were advantages to being graceful. A society formed to make a lot of use of the powers of fae and nature’s spirits would naturally become noble and elegant in certain aspects.

“I mean, that’s the reason I keep my hair long, y’know? The transient world’s well known for liking long, beautiful hair.”

Now that I thought about it, Menel put practicality first in hunting and battles, yet he’d never once shown any sign of cutting his long hair, which took a lot of effort just to take care of. I’d also met a group of elves from Lothdor during the Valacirca incident, and I remembered most of them having long hair as well.

“So that’s why you don’t cut your hair.”

It all made so much sense that I couldn’t help feeling satisfied by the explanation. So it was all so the residents of the transient world would take to them...

“I shouldn’t make it out like they’re all the same, I guess. They’ve all got their own type.”

“Type, you say.”

“I mean it’s not like, have a handsome face and then they’ll like you. They’re not that simple.”

The fae and spirits associated with light and fire liked flashiness and preferred people with sunny, positive dispositions, as well as those who held intense anger inside them. The fae and spirits associated with air and water had a preference for unworldly people who didn’t obsess over material things. They also liked everything graceful and delicate, as well as people who had

conflicting emotions like joy and sorrow inside them. The fae and spirits associated with earth and trees preferred those with simple and collected personalities, as well as easygoing, peaceful optimists. They were fond of aspects like simplicity and functional beauty.

“Or take the fae of darkness, chaos, fear, or jealousy. They tend to love people twisted with deep obsession, jealousy, bloodlust, brutality, or passion.”

Menel told me that the “beauty” the fae admired took many different forms.

“And all the elven settlements and clans have different aesthetics depending on what kinds of fae they revere and what kinds of boons they mainly have.”

“Umm, there are places that specialize in fae of darkness, chaos, fear, and jealousy?”

“There are, but... well, they’re not really places you’d wanna go.”

He told me that most of those places were a little shady. Some were harsh environments where there was no choice but to become good at going along with stuff like that, while other times, there were ruffians who used abilities from those kinds of fae to fight, or executors who used those abilities to lay curses.

“So when you see an elemental, it’s important to keep in mind the impression you get from how they look. What they can do and the vibe they give off match up, most times.”

“I see,” I said, nodding.

I never interacted very deeply with the world of fae and spirits, but maybe it was time I deepened my knowledge a little.

“So, we got a bit off-topic. What are you doing, then?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Uh, ya? The king’s brother invited you to the party, remember?”

“Yep.” I nodded.

After the Valacirca scare was past, Ethel had invited me and Menel to attend the party he was going to hold in Whitesails at the winter solstice, the day after

which the days started to get longer again. In other words, it was a party to celebrate the beginning of the new year. As His Excellency's knight, I naturally had no objection to accepting his invitation and wishing him a happy new year. However...

"So, clothing? This is what I'm planning on wearing."

"Huh? I was going to wear the formal clothes I always use for—Is that... wrong?"

With every word, Menel's eyes became narrower and narrower. By the time I realized I'd misspoken, it was too late.

"Will. Will, brother. Think about how much attention you attract, you idiot!" He slapped me on the back of the head. "You've pulled off one hell of an achievement, and everyone's gonna be like, 'Okay, here he comes, what's the legendary paladin's entrance gonna be like?' and you're gonna walk in wearing the same, safe-ass outfit you wear every year?!"

"But formal clothes are expensive, and they'll have to work really fast to get some made up now!"

"You can afford it! And the workers'll make an effort for you! More to the point, you're the one who's meant to be creating jobs for the tailors! Knock off your weird money-saving thing and drop some fig cash!"

"B-But I'm no good at fashion..."

"You're popular. Even if the clothes look a bit weird, just wear them with confidence and everyone'll just accept it like that's the style!"

Whap, whap.

"That's it, I'm getting some made for you! Bee and Tonio probably know what's in right now. I'll talk to them, and we'll get your outfit ready by the winter solstice!"

And so Menel dragged me to the tailor's. As I listened to him talk about materials and color schemes, I learned for the first time that there was a side to him that was really into extravagant clothes.

"We're gonna ace these clothes, and when you're at the party, you're gonna

hit on a girl or two and show me you can pick one up. I'll help you out."

"Whaa? No way! Impossible!"

"What's impossible?!"

"I can't handle talking to women, there's no way!"

"How is it you've got so much guts when you're fighting monsters, but you get cold feet when it comes to women?!"

"I can beat monsters! You just hit them with muscle!"

"Are you ever gonna do anything about that barbarian brain?!"

And so we continued, arguing and laughing noisily.

Hobbies: Tonio

It was a board with stately character, polished by months and years of time. Squares of sycamore and walnut were laid alternately in a nine-by-nine checkerboard pattern. It was a very involved piece of woodwork. Silverwork and a subtle carving of vines decorated the board's edges. This may have been part of a game, but it was more than that. This was a piece of art. I stared at it, captivated.

"Hoowee! That's so pretty!" Bee exclaimed from beside me.

"It's well made," said Menel as he gave the board a rough look-over—but he handled it with respect. "You couldn't make something like this around here. Doesn't look like it was snagged from some ruin, either. This an import from the north?"

"Yes. I discovered it when I went to make some trades the other day. I fell in love with it at first sight and purchased it on the spot. I couldn't help myself."

The one smiling with a hint of embarrassment was Tonio, the merchant.

"Do you like Infantry?" I asked.

"I do." He laughed. "If only I were any good."

Infantry was the name of one of the most popular board games in this part of

this world. The players would decide who was to go first, then take turns moving one of their pieces, of which there were eight kinds: the pawn, the giant, the wyvern, the fairy, the caster, the priest, the knight, and the king. The goal was to take your opponent's king.

The closest thing from my previous world was probably board games derived from chaturanga like chess or shogi. It was a two-player, zero-sum, finite, deterministic game of perfect information. The people of this world were similar physically and identical in their souls to the people of my last. It made sense that the games they came up with would be similar.

"What about the pieces? Wow, these are really elaborate as well! Whoa!" Bee cried out as she gazed at a beautifully carved milky-white piece that had probably been made from the fang of a marine creature. The piece she was holding was a wyvern with its wings folded and its neck held imposingly high. Within the game, it was considered a major piece; it could move a long way along the diagonal and was easy to use.

"This one's pretty, too," Bee said, continuing on to pick up an androgynous fairy piece. This too was beautiful. "Hm? Doesn't this one look like Menel?"

"Huh? You think?" Menel tilted his head.

Tonio watched the two of them with a charming smile. We were currently gathered near the front of the store at the trading company Tonio was running by the port. We'd dropped by because he was carrying out a deal that for various reasons we had to be present for. After that was done, Bee turned up as well, and we all started talking about random topics. The conversation led to Tonio bringing out this Infantry set.

Tonio, who was normally so sedate, had showed the set to us with a little bit of pride, so he probably liked it quite a lot.

Bee, who was gazing hard at the beautiful board and pieces, suddenly turned to Tonio and said, "Hey, can I have a play?!" Her eyes were sparkling cheerfully.

"Of course you may, Robina." Tonio nodded with his usual smile.

"Okay, Menel, let's play!"

"Me?! Why?"

“Cause Will looks like he'd be good at it! And so does Tonio!”

“And I look like I'd be bad, do I?!”

“In comparison? Yeah, I think so.”

“You wait, missy.”

They must both have been familiar with the rules already. They set up the pieces, flipped a coin to decide who would go first, and started to play. Tonio and I watched as the game progressed... and... yep.

“Huh? Ah, the wyvern was covering that?! You're kidding?!”

Menel cackled. “You let your guard down...”

Menel made short work of Bee's sloppy play. Menel's own skill was nothing especially noteworthy, but the way he invited carelessness, set up traps, and drew his opponent into them was cunning and greatly suited him.

“Gaaah! I lost!”

Tonio laughed. “All right, Robina, why don't you and I play a game?”

“I'll *never* win against *you*!”

“No, no, give it a try. I'll give you a handicap.”

Tonio exchanged seats with Menel and boldly removed his giant, wyvern, fairy, and caster pieces from the board. Bee looked at the board for a while, unusually quiet, then said, “I think I could win now!”

And she started her match against Tonio. She made several mistakes and had pieces taken as the game went on, but ultimately—

“Yeeeah!”

She won.

“Oh dear,” Tonio said and laughed. “Losing that many pieces was quite punishing, it seems.”

As we played around like that, making lots of noise inside the store, passers-by and people who lived around the area started to pop their heads in.

“Oh, nice and lively in here.”

“Infantry?”

This was still quite a rural area, and pretty much everyone knew each other. It made for a relaxed atmosphere.

“Would any of you care to play?” Tonio smiled at them engagingly. “I have a number of other boards. It may be your chance to defeat the Paladin.”

Then he threw a smile at me, saying, “What do you say?”

I nodded. “I’m up to the challenge.”

“Oh, he’s confident!”

“I’ll never have stronger arms than this guy, but I might stand a chance at Infantry!”

Before I knew it, more and more people had gathered and all set up boards, and games were being played all over the store. Despite some mutterings from Menel that told me he wasn’t really into this, he went along with it surprisingly well by playing against himself. Bee seemed to be enjoying spectating and went around watching how the different matches were unfolding and chipping in comments. As for me...

“Daaaah, the Paladin’s too *good!*”

“The way you use this giant to protect the knight so it can come forward is very clever.”

“And your castles are so damn strong. Strengthening with the priest here, was that called a Tower castle?”

I was wiping the floor with all my challengers. These kinds of board games were also something Gus had trained me in, so I was pretty good at them. I looked over at Tonio. He had a smile on his face as he cheerfully played one of the people who had come to his store.

“Well done,” he said after a laugh.

“Tonio, buddy, you almost had me!”

It got to the point where drinks and snacks were brought out. The lively Infantry tournament continued until it got dark, with laughter filling the shop.

And then finally it wound to a close, and everyone went their separate ways.

As I helped Tonio clear up, I dropped a casual comment. “Tonio, those were all very close matches you played.”

“Yes, that’s exactly the level I am, it seems. How embarrassing.”

“Oh, no, I think it’s amazing. Losing by a hair every time is harder to pull off than winning.”

When I said that, Tonio’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “You weren’t fooled.”

“Well, I kind of got the feeling. I thought you’d be more interested in everyone having fun and making good memories than beating your opponents into the ground.”

“Is that because I’m in the business of selling things?”

“No.”

Certainly, it was better for business if he left a good impression rather than a bad one, and that might have contributed to his decision. But there was a bigger reason.

“It felt to me like you just wanted a lot of people to like Infantry.”

When I said that, Tonio gave me a deeply peaceful smile. It wasn’t his usual business smile. It was a very transparent expression for him.

“I lost my wife many years ago. She was often in poor health, but she liked to play Infantry.”

I was speechless.

“We often played together,” he said calmly. “She was very strong. I was no match for her.”

Somewhere in his voice, I could sense the affection he had for her. All I could do was nod and continue helping him tidy up. I couldn’t think of anything appropriate to say.

After our work was almost done, I said, “Tonio, would you mind having a game with me? A serious one.”

“No, I wouldn’t mind. Let’s play.” He smiled.

In the now-dark room, under the wavering light of a lamp, Tonio and I sat on opposite sides of that beautiful board and took turns making the satisfying sound of a piece against wood.

To cut a long story short, Tonio's fairy chopped the head off my king.

I said, "Good game" to him, and Tonio thanked me. After that, every few times I stopped by his store, Tonio and I would play a game of Infantry together.

Hobbies: Bee

"Will, let's go eat! I heard about a good place!"

I happened to stop by Whitesails one day because I had something to decide on with Ethel. In the evening, *she* came bursting into my room, and the above words were the first out of her mouth.

"Hey, Bee. You look well." I replied with a grin, amused by her beaming smile and the fact that she'd shouted about food before even giving a greeting.

My friend and red-haired troubadour, Bee, really loved food. When asked about the subject, she would say, "Breakfast, dinner, high tea, elevenses, low tea, and supper! Eating for pleasure has been a part of halfling culture since ancient times!" However, I knew several halflings who didn't eat as much as she did, so I thought Bee was probably just a glutton.

"But you usually go off on your own, right? Why did you come looking for me this time? Is something happening?"

"Well, the thing is, the place I'm interested in is a kinda rough area near the port. I heard the fisherman's soup there is really tasty."

"Aha."

The port made use of a lot of physical laborers, and with all the boats going in and out, there were also a lot of dubious people coming and going around there. Some of those streets just didn't feel safe.

"So, I heard you were coming to town, and I thought, this is perfect."

"So I'm your handy tagalong?"

“Yep. I’ll treat you, though!”

I laughed a little. “You’re about the only one in the whole of Whitesails who would come up with the idea of making the Paladin your bodyguard while you go around the city looking for places to eat.”

“Aren’t I great?” she said, and we both grinned.

I immediately set about getting ready. If I was going to be heading into a rough area, I had to make sure I didn’t carry more money on me than necessary and didn’t dress in a way that made it look like I had money, either.

“You’re so careful. Even if a gang of thieves attacked us, I know you could win.”

“Even so, there’s no need to increase the amount of pain and grudges in this world.”

I dressed myself in a worn-out cloak that didn’t look very high quality, and the two of us talked as we walked through the city. We headed towards a slightly dusky street close to the dock where boats unloaded their goods.

“Hmm. There’s the landmark I heard about, so... Ah, there we go!”

Bee led me towards one of the street’s smaller taverns. An old lantern was tied to the tavern sign, and several wooden boxes were stacked outside. Warm light and a jolly atmosphere leaked out through the entrance and the windows, both of which were being kept wide open. Inside, many boisterous men were pouring drinks for each other, laughing in loud voices and shooting jokes back and forth.

We skipped on in, and a chirpy member of staff with fuzzy black hair and brown skin called out, “Welcome! Please sit wherever you want!”

“Heya!” Bee replied in a voice that was equally as cheery. “I heard your fisherman’s soup was good? That for two please, and something to drink.”

“Coming right up!”

Very quickly, we were served rye bread, ale, and the fisherman’s soup we were here for. The weak ale and the hard, sour rye bread were, to be honest, pretty much what I’d come to expect from this area. But the fisherman’s soup

Bee had heard so much about, which came served in deep soup bowls, was in a class of its own.

“Ohh...”

“Now *this*...”

Not all the fish the fishermen caught in their nets were fit for normal sale; some were too small or a type they weren't targeting. This tavern had probably bought those off them for cheap, boiled them in seawater along with, again, likely leftover vegetable scraps from the market, and finished off the flavor with herbs. That was probably all it was, but once we tried it after briefly saying grace, we both agreed it was also terribly delicious. It was a salty soup with the rich flavors of the ocean, including tender shrimp, prawns, and whitefish that fell apart beautifully. Bee and I bolted it down feverishly.

“Seconds, please!”

“Oh, and me!”

After drinking some weak ale and refreshing our palates, we went back for more fisherman's soup. Soaking the hard rye bread in it was also very tasty. In the end, two helpings were gone before I knew it, and without it ever occurring to me to make conversation.

“Thanks, that was really good!”

“It was delicious!”

“Thank you very much! Please come again!”

We paid our bill with copper coins and left quickly. It felt wrong to stick around too long after eating when they were busy. Besides, I'd felt a probing gaze on me at more than one point during our meal. I didn't want the back of my head bashed in on our way back from the tavern. I reminded myself to stay alert.

“Thanks for inviting me today, Bee,” I said, smiling. “That was delicious.”

“Huh?” Bee looked at me with wide eyes and tilted her head.

“Huh?” I went wide-eyed too, confused by her strange reaction.

“What?”

Just as I was about to delve inside my head to see if I’d forgotten something, Bee looked at me, mystified, and said something terrible. “Did I say just one tavern?”

“Wha?”

“It’s not often I get a good bodyguard like you, so I was planning on trying out all the taverns I’d heard about on the streets around here.”

“H-Hold on a second, isn’t that a little dangerous?”

“And there’s no need to worry, ’cause even if we are attacked, the Paladin’s right here! It’s so nice to be able to try out all these places without having to worry about safety, you know?♪”

“W-Wait a sec! Bee! Bee?!”

All the food I ate that day tasted very good, but for some reason, I ended up losing a little weight.

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